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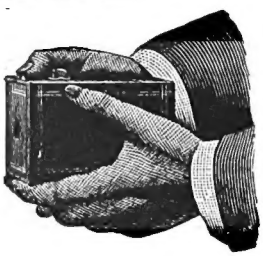

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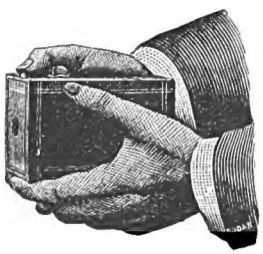

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THE LOVERS OF YVONNE

By RAFAEL SABATINI.

THIS NEW SERIAL STARTS TO-DAY.

CHAPTER I.

Of How a Boy Drank too Much Wine, and What Came of It.

Andrea de Mancini sprawled, ingloriously drunk, upon the floor. His legs were thrust under the table, and his head rested against the chair from which he had slipped; his long black hair was tossed and dishevelled; his handsome, boyish face flushed and garbed in the vacant expression of idiocy.

"I beg a thousand pardons, M. de Luynes," quoth he in the thick, monotonous voice of a man whose brain but ill controls his tongue. "I beg a thousand pardons for the unseemly poverty of our repast. 'Tis no fault of mine. My Lord Cardinal keeps a most unworthy table for me. Faugh! Uncle Guilio is a Hebrew—if not by birth, by instinct. He carries his purse-strings in a knot which it would break his heart to unfasten. But there, some day my Lord Cardinal will go to Heaven—to the lap of Abraham. I shall be rich then, vastly rich, and I shall bid you to a banquet worthy of your most noble blood. The Cardinal's health—perdition have him for the niggardliest rogue unhung!"

I pushed back my chair and rose. The conversation was taking a turn that was too unhealthy to be pursued within the walls of the Palais Mazarin, where there existed, albeit the law books made no reference to it, the heinous crime of *lèse-Eminence*—a crime this for which more men had been broken than it pleases me to dwell on.

"Your table, Master Andrea, needs no apology," I answered carelessly. "Your wine, for instance, is beyond praise."

"Ah, yes! The wine. But, Heavens, Monsieur," he ejaculated, for a moment opening wide his heavy eyelids, "do you believe 'twas Mazarin provided it? Pooh. 'Twas a present made me by M. de la Motte, who seeks my interest with my Lord Cardinal to obtain for him an appointment in his Eminence's household, and thus thinks to earn my good will. He's a pestilent creature this la Motte," he added, with a hiccough, "a pestilent creature; but, by Heaven, but his wine is good, and I'll speak to my uncle. Help me up, de Luynes. Help me up, I say; I would drink the health of this provider of wines."

I hurried forward, but he had struggled up unaided, and stood swaying with one hand on the table and the other at the back of his chair. In vain did I remonstrate with him that already he had drunk over much.

"'Tis a lie," he shouted. "May not a gentleman sit upon the floor from choice?"

To emphasise his protestation he imprudently withdrew his hand from the chair and struck at the air with his open palm. That gesture cost him his balance. He staggered, toppled backward, and clutched madly at the tablecloth as he fell, dragging glasses and bottles with a deafening crash on to the floor.

Then, as I stood aghast and alarmed, wondering who might have overheard the thunder of his fall, the fool sat up amidst the ruins, and filled the room with his shrieks of drunken laughter.

"Silence! boy," I thundered, springing towards him. "Silence, or we shall have the whole house about our ears."

And truly were my fears well grounded, for, before I could assist him to rise, I heard the door behind me open. Apprehensively I turned, and sickened to see that that which I had dreaded most was come to pass. A tall, imposing figure in scarlet robes stood erect and scowling on the threshold, and behind him his valet, Bernouin, bearing a lighted taper.

Mancini's laugh faded into a tremulous cackle, then died out, and with gaping mouth and glassy eyes he sat there staring at his uncle.

Thus we stayed in silence whilst a man might count mayhap a dozen; then the Cardinal's voice rang harsh and full of anger.

"'Tis thus that you fulfil your trust, M. de Luynes," he said.

"Your Eminence," I began, scarce knowing what I should say, when he cut me short.

"I will deal with you presently and elsewhere." He stepped up to Andrea, and surveyed him for a moment in disgust. "Get up, sir!" he commanded. "Get up!"

The lad sought to obey him with an alacrity that merited a kinder fate. Had he been in less haste perchance he had been more successful. As it was, he got no farther than his knees when his right leg slid from under him, and he fell prone among the shattered tableware, mumbling curses and apologies in a breath.

Mazarin stood gazing at him with an eye that was eloquent in scorn, then bending down he spoke quickly to him in Italian. What he said I know not, being ignorant of their mother tongue; but, from the fierceness of his utterance, I'll wager my soul 'twas nothing sweet to listen to. When he had done with him, he turned to his valet.

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"Bernouin," said he, "summon M: de Mancini's servant and assist him to get my nephew abed. M. de Luynes, be good enough to take Bernouin's taper and to light me back to my apartments.

Unsavoury as was the task, I had no choice but to obey, and to stalk in front of him, candle in hand, like an acolyte at Notre Dame, and in my heart the profound conviction that I was about to have a bad quarter of an hour with his Eminence. Nor was I wrong; for no sooner had we reached his cabinet and the door had been closed than he turned upon me the full measure of his wrath.

"You miserable fool," he snarled. "Did you think to trifle with the trust which in a misguided moment I placed in you? Think you that, when a week ago I saved you from starvation to clothe and feed you and give you a lieutenancy in my guards, I should endure so foul an abuse as this? Think you that I intrusted M. de Mancini's training in arms to you so that you might lead him into the dissolute habits which have dragged you down to what you are—to what you were before I rescued you—to what you will be to-morrow when I shall have again abandoned you?"

"Hear me, Eminence," I cried indignantly. "'Tis no fault of mine. Some fool hath sent M. de Mancini a basket of wine and——"

"And you showed him how to abuse it," he broke in harshly. "You have taught the boy to become a sot; in time, were he to remain under your guidance, I make no doubt but that he would become a gamester and a duellist as well. I was mad, perchance, to give him into your care; but I have the good fortune to be still in time, before the mischief has sunk farther, to withdraw him from it, and to cast you back into the kennel from which I picked you."

"Your Eminence does not mean——"

"By Heaven, I do!" he cried. "You shall quit the Palais Royal this very night, M. de Luynes, and if ever I find you unbidden within half-a-mile of it, I will do that which out of a misguided sense of compassion I do not now—I will have you flung into a dungeon of the Bastille, where better men than you have rotted before to-day. Great Heavens, do you think that I am to be fooled by such a thing as you?"

"Does your Eminence dismiss me?" I cried aghast, and scarce crediting that such was indeed the extreme measure upon which he had determined.

"Have I not been plain enough?" he answered with a snarl.

I realised to the full my unenviable position, and with the realisation of it there came over me the recklessness of him who has played his last stake at the tables and lost. That recklessness it was that caused me to shrug my shoulders with a laugh. I was a soldier of fortune—or should I say a soldier of misfortune?—as rich in vice as I was poor in virtue; a man who lived by the steel and parried the blows that came as best he might, or parried them not at all—but never quailed.

"As your Eminence pleases," I answered coolly, "albeit methinks that for one who has shed his blood for France as freely as I have done, a little clemency were not unfitting."

He raised his eyebrows, and his lips curled in a malicious sneer.

"You come of a family, M. de Luynes," he said slowly, "that is famed for having shed the blood of others for France more freely than its own. You are, I believe, the nephew of Albert de Luynes. Do you forget the Marshal d'Ancre?"

I felt the blood of anger hot in my face as I made haste to answer him.

"There are many of us, Monseigneur, who have cause to blush for the families they spring from—more cause, mayhap, than hath Gaston de Luynes."

In my words, perchance, there was no offensive meaning, but in my tone and in the look which I bent upon the Cardinal there was that which told him that I alluded to his own obscure and dubious origin. He grew livid, and for a moment methought he would have struck me. Had he done so, then indeed the history of Europe would have been other than it is to-day. He restrained himself, however, and drawing himself to the full height of his majestic figure he extended his arm toward the door.

"Go," he said, in a voice that passion rendered hoarse. "Go, Monsieur. 'Go, quickly, while my clemency endures. Go before I summon the guard and deal with you as your temerity deserves."

I bowed, not without a taint of mockery, for I cared little what might follow; then, with head erect and the firm tread of defiance, I stalked out of his apartment, along the corridor, down the great staircase, across the courtyard, past the guard—which, ignorant of my disgrace, saluted me—and out into the street.

Then at last my head sank forward on my breast, and deep in thought I wended my way home, oblivious of all around me, even the chill bite of the February wind.

In my mind I reviewed my wasted life, with the fleeting pleasures and the enduring sorrows that it had brought me, or that I had drawn from it. The Cardinal said no more than truth when he spoke of having saved me from starvation. A week ago that was indeed what he had done. He had taken pity on Gaston de Luynes, the nephew of that famous Albert de Luynes who had been Constable of France in the early days of the late king's reign; and he had made me lieutenant of his guards and fencing-master to his nephews Andrea and Paolo de Mancini, because he knew that a better blade than mine could not be found in France, and because he thought it well to have such swords as mine about him.

A little week ago life had been replete with fresh promises, the gates of the road to fame (and perchance fortune) had been opened to me anew, and now, before I had fairly passed that gate, I had been thrust rudely back, and it had been slammed in my face because it pleased a fool to become a sot whilst in my company.

There is a subtle poetry in the contemplation of ruin. With ruin, itself, howbeit, there comes a prosaic dispelling of all idle dreams—a hard, a grim, a vile reality.

Ruin! 'Tis an ugly word. A fitting one to carve upon the tombstone of a reckless, godless, dissolute life such as mine had been.

Back, Gaston de Luynes; back to the kennel whence the Cardinal's hand did for a moment pluck you; back, from the morning of hope to the night of despair; back, to choose between starvation and the earning of a pauper's fee as a master of fence.

CHAPTER II.

The Fruit of Indiscretion.

Despite the dejection to which I had become a prey, I slept no less soundly that night than was my wont, and, indeed, it was not until late next morning, when someone knocked at my door, that I awakened.

I sat up in bed, and my first thought as I looked round the handsome room, which I had rented a week ago upon receiving the lieutenancy in the Cardinal's guards, was for the position that I had lost and of the need that there would be ere long to seek a lodging more humble and better suited to my straitened circumstances. It was not without regret that such a thought came to me; for my tastes had never been modest, and the house was a fine one, situated in the Rue St. Antoine at a hundred paces or so from the Jesuit convent.

I had no time, however, to indulge the sorry mood that threatened to beset me, for the knocking at my chamber door continued, until at length I answered it with a command to enter.

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It was my servant Michelot, a grizzled veteran of huge frame and strength, who had fought beside me at Rocroi, and who had thereafter become so enamored of my person, for some trivial service he swore I had rendered him, that he had attached himself to me and my luckless fortunes.

He came to inform me that M. de Mancini was below and craved immediate speech with me. He had scarce done speaking, however, when Andrea himself, having doubtless grown tired of waiting, appeared in the doorway. He wore a sickly look, the result of his last night's debauch; but, more than that, there was stamped upon his face a look of latent passion, which made me think at first that he was come to upbraid me.

"Ah, still abed, Luynes?" was his greeting as he came forward.

His cloak was wet and his boots splashed, which told me both that he had come afoot and that it rained.

"There are no duties that bid me rise," I answered sourly.

He frowned at that; then divesting himself of his cloak he gave it to Michelot, who, at a sign from me, withdrew. No sooner was the door closed than the boy's whole manner changed. The simmering passion of which I had detected signs welled up and seemed to choke him as he poured forth the story that he was come to tell.

"I have been insulted," he gasped. "Grossly insulted by a vile creature of Monsieur d'Orleans' household. An hour ago, in the ante-chamber at the Palais Royal, I was spoken of in my hearing as the besotted nephew of the Italian adventurer."

I sat up in bed, tingling with excitement at the developments which already I saw arising from his last night's imprudence.

"Calmly, Andrea," I begged of him; "tell me calmly."

"Heavens, man, how can I be calm. Ough! The thought of it chokes me. I was a fool last night—a sot. For that, perchance, men have some right to censure me. But to think that a ruffler of the stamp of Eugène de Canaples should speak of it, should call me the nephew of an Italian adventurer, should draw down upon me the cynical smile of a crowd of courtly apes—pah! I am sick at the memory of it."

"Did you answer him?"

"Gracious! I should be worthy of the title he bestowed upon me had I not done so. Oh, I answered him—not in words. I threw my hat in his face."

"That was a passing eloquent reply!"

"So eloquent that it left him speechless with amazement. He thought to bully with impunity and see me slink into hiding like a whipped dog, terrified by his blustering tongue and dangerous reputation. But there," he broke off, "a meeting has been arranged for four o'clock at St. Germain."

"A meeting!" I exclaimed.

"What else? Do you think the affront left any alternative?"

"But—"

"Yes, yes, I know," he interrupted, tossing his head. "I am going to be killed. Verville has sworn that there shall be one less of the Italian brood. That is why I have come to you, Luynes, to ask you to be my second. I don't deserve it, perhaps. In my folly last night I did you an ill turn. I unwittingly caused you to be stripped of your commission. But if I were on my deathbed now,

With gaping mouth and glassy eyes Mancini sat there staring at his uncle.

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and begged a favour of you, you would not refuse it. And what difference is there 'twixt me and one who is on his deathbed? Am I not about to die?"

"Well, I hope not," I made answer with more lightness than I felt. "But I'll stand by you, with all my heart, Andrea."

"And you'll avenge me?" he cried savagely, his Southern blood a-boiling. "You'll not let him leave the ground alive?"

"Not unless my opponent commits the indiscretion of killing me first. Who seconds M. de Canaples?"

"The Marquis de St. Auban and M. de Montmédy?"

"And who is the third in our party?"

"I have none. I thought that perhaps you had a friend."

"I! A friend?" I laughed bitterly. "Pshaw, Andrea, beggars have no friends. But stay; find Stanislas de Gouville. There is no better blade in Paris. If he will join us in this frolic, and you can hold off Canaples until either St. Auban or Montmédy are disposed of, we may yet leave the three of them on the field of battle. Courage, Andrea. While there's life, there's hope."

My words seemed to cheer him, and when presently he left me to seek out the redoubtable de Gouville, the poor lad's face was brighter by far than when he had entered my room.

Down in my heart, however, I was less hopeful than I had led him to believe, and as I dressed after he had gone, 'twas not without some uneasiness that I turned the matter over in my mind. I had, during the short period of our association, grown fond of Andrea de Mancini. Indeed, the wonted sweetness of the lad's temper and the gentleness of his disposition were such as to breed affection in all who came in contact with him.

In a way, too, methought he had grown fond of me; and I had known so few friends in life—truth to tell, I fear me that I had few of the qualities that engender friendship—that I was naturally prone to appreciate a gift that from its rareness became doubly valuable.

Hence was it that I trembled for the boy. He had shown aptitude with the foils, and derived great profit from my tuition, yet he was too raw by far to be pitted against so cunning a swordsman as Canaples.

I had but finished dressing when a coach rumbled down the street that halted by my door. Naturally I supposed that some one came to visit Coupri the apothecary, to whom belonged this house in which I had my lodging, and did not give the matter a second thought until Michelot rushed in, with eyes wide open, to announce that his Eminence, Cardinal Mazarin, commanded my presence in the adjoining room.

Amazed and deeply marvelling what so extraordinary a visit might portend, I hastened to wait upon his Eminence.

I found him standing by the window, and received from him a greeting that was passing curt and cavalierly.

"Has M. de Mancini been here?" he inquired preremptorily, disregarding the chair I offered him.

"He has but left me, Monseigneur."

"Then you know, sir, of the harvest which he has already reaped from the indiscretion into which you led him last night."

"If Monseigneur alludes to the affront put upon M. de Mancini, touching *his* last night's indiscretion, by a bully of the Court, I am informed of it."

"Pish, Monsieur! I do not follow your fine distinctions. Possibly this is due to my imperfect knowledge of the language of France, possibly to your own imperfect acquaintance with the language of truth."

"Monseigneur!"

"Faugh!" he cried half-scornfully, half-peevishly. "I came not here to talk of you, but of my nephew. Why did he visit you?"

"To do me the honour of asking me to second him at St. Germain this evening."

"And so you think that this duel is to be fought? That my nephew is to be murdered?"

"We will endeavor to prevent his being—as your Eminence daintily puts it—murdered. But for the rest, the duel, methinks, cannot be avoided."

"Cannot!" he blazed. "Do you say *cannot*, M. de Luynes? Mark me well, sir, I will use no dissimulation with you. My position in France is already a sufficiently difficult one. Already we are threatened with a second Fronde. It needs but such events as these to bring my family into prominence and make it the butt for the ridicule that malcontents but wait an opportunity to slur it with. This affair of Andrea's will lend itself to a score or so of lampoons and *pasquinades*, all of which will cast an injurious reflection upon my person and position. That, Monsieur, is, methinks, sufficient evil to suffer at your hands. The late Cardinal would have had you broken on the wheel for less. I have gone no farther than to dismiss you from my service, a clemency for which you should be grateful! But I shall not suffer that, in addition to the harm already done, Andrea shall be murdered by Canaples."

"I shall do my best to render him assistance."

"You still misapprehend me. This duel, sir, *must not* take place."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"How does your Eminence propose to frustrate it? Will you arrest Canaples?"

"Upon what plea, Monsieur? Think you I am anxious to have the whole of Paris howling in my ears?"

"Then possibly it is your good purpose to enforce the late king's edict against duelling, and send your Guards to St. Germain to arrest the men before they engage?"

"Faugh!" he sneered. "And what will Paris say if I now enforce a law that for ten years has been disregarded? That I feared for my nephew's skin and took this means of saving him. A pretty story to have on Paris' lips, would it not be?"

"Indeed, Monseigneur, you are right, and I doubt me the duel will needs be fought."

"Have I not already said that it shall *not* be fought?"

Again I shrugged my shoulders. Mazarin grew tiresome with his repetitions.

"How can it be avoided, Eminence?"

"Ah! Monsieur, that is your affair."

"My affair?"

"Assuredly. 'Twas through your evil agency he was dragged into this business, and through your agency he must be extricated from it."

"Your Eminence jests!"

"Undoubtedly 'tis a jesting matter," he answered with terrible irony. "Oh, I jest. By Heaven, yes. But I'll carry my jest so far as to have you hanged if this duel be fought—aye, whether my nephew suffers hurt or not. Now, sir, you know what fate awaits you; fight it; turn it aside; I have shown you the way. The door, M. de Luynes."

CHAPTER III.

The Fight in the Horse Market.

I let him go without a word. There was that in his voice, in his eye, and in the gesture wherewith he bade me hold the door for him, that cleared my mind of any doubts touching the irrevocable character of his determination. To plead was never an accomplishment of mine; to argue, I saw, would be to waste the Cardinal's time to no purpose.

And so, I let him go, and my curse with him, and from my window I watched his coach drive away in the drizz-

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ling rain, scattering the crowd of awe-stricken loiterers who had collected at the rumour of his presence.

With a fervent prayer that his patron saint, the Devil, might see fit to overset his coach and break his neck before he reached the Palace, I turned from the window and called Michelot.

He was quick to answer my summons, bringing me the frugal measure of bread and wine wherewith it was my custom to break my fast. Then, whilst I munched my crust, I strode to and fro in the little chamber and exercised my wits to their utmost for a solution to the puzzle his Eminence had set me.

One solution there was, and an easy one—flight. But I had promised Andrea de Mancini that I would stand beside him at St. Germain; there was a slender chance of saving him if I went, whilst if I stayed away, there would be nothing left for his Eminence to do but offer up prayers for the rest of his nephew's soul.

Another idea I had, but it was desperate; and yet so persistently did my thoughts revert to it, that in the end I determined to accept it.

I drank a cup of Armagnac, cheered myself with an oath or two, and again called Michelot. When he came, I asked him was he acquainted with M. de Canaples, to which he replied that he was, having seen the gentleman in my company.

"Then," I said, "you will repair to M. de Canaples' lodging, in the Rue des Gesvres, and ascertain discreetly whether he be at home. If he is, you will watch the house until he comes forth, then follow him, and bring me word thereafter where he is to be found. Should he be already abroad before you reach the Rue des Gesvres, endeavour to ascertain whither he has gone, and return forthwith. But, be discreet, Michelot. You understand?"

He assured me that he did, and left me to nurse my unpleasant thoughts for half-an-hour, returning at the end of that time with the information that M. de Canaples was seated at dinner in the "Auberge du Soleil."

Naught could have been more attuned to my purpose, and straight-away I drew on my boots, girt on my sword, and, taking my hat and cloak, I sallied out into the rain and wended my way at a sharp pace towards the Rue St. Honoré.

One o'clock was striking as I crossed the threshold of the "Soleil" and flung my dripping cloak to the first servant I chanced upon.

I glanced round the well-filled room, and at one of the tables I espied my quarry in company with St. Auban and Montmédy—the very gentlemen who were to fight beside him that evening—and one Vilmorin, as arrant a coxcomb and poltroon as could be found in France. With my beaver cocked at the back of my head, and a general bearing that for aggressiveness would be hard to surpass, I strode up to their table, and stood for a moment surveying them with an insolent stare that made them pause in their conversation. They raised their noble heads and bestowed upon me a look of haughty and disdainful wonder—such a look as one might bestow upon a misbehaving lackey—all save Vilmorin, who, with a coward's keen nose for danger, turned slightly pale and fidgeted in his chair. I was well-known to all of them, but my attitude forbade all greeting.

"Has M. de Luynes lost anything?" St. Auban inquired icily.

"His wits, mayhap," quoted Canaples, with a contemptuous shrug.

He was a tall, powerfully built man, this Canaples, with a swart, cruel face that was nevertheless not ill-favored, and a profusion of black hair.

"There is a temerity in M. de Canaples' rejoinder that I had not looked for," I said banteringly.

Canaples' brow was puckered in a frown.

"Ha? And why not, Monsieur?"

"Why not? Because it is not to be expected that one who fastens quarrels upon schoolboys would evince the courage to beard Gaston de Luynes."

"Monsieur!" the four of them cried in chorus, so loudly that the hum of voices in the tavern became hushed, and all eyes were turned in our direction.

"M. de Canaples," I said calmly, "permit me to say that I can find no more fitting expression for the contempt I hold you in than this."

As I spoke, I seized a corner of the tablecloth, and with a sudden tug I swept it, with all it held, on to the floor.

Heavens, what a scene there was! In an instant the four of them were on their feet, as were half the occupants of the room, besides, whilst poor Vilmorin, who stood trembling like a maid who for the first time hears words of love, raised his quavering voice to cry soothingly, "Messieurs, Messieurs!"

Canaples was livid with passion, but otherwise the calmest in that room, saving perhaps myself. With a gesture he restrained Montmédy and St. Auban.

"I shall be happy to give Master de Luynes all the proof of my courage that he may desire, and more, I warrant, than he will relish."

"Bravely answered!" I cried, with an approving nod and a beaming smile. "Be good enough to lead the way to a convenient spot."

"I have other business at the moment," he answered calmly. "Let us say to-morrow at——"

"Faugh!" I broke in scornfully. "I knew it! Confess, Monsieur, that you dare not fight me now lest you should be unable to keep your appointments for this evening."

"By Heaven!" exclaimed St. Auban, "this insolence passes all bounds."

"Each man in his turn, if you please, gentlemen," I replied. "My present affair is with M. de Canaples."

There was a hot answer burning on St. Auban's lips, but Canaples was beforehand with him.

"That will do!" he cried. "You go too far, sir, with your 'dare' and 'dare not.' Is a broken gamester, a penniless adventurer, to tell Eugène de Canaples what he dares? Come, sir; since you are eager for the taste of steel, follow me, and say your prayers as you go."

With that we left the inn, amidst a prodigious hubbub, and made our way to the horse market behind the Hotel Vendôme. It was not to be expected, albeit the place we had chosen was usually deserted at such an hour, that after the affair at the "Soleil" our meeting would go unattended. When we faced each other, Canaples and I, there were at least some twenty persons present, who came, despite the rain, to watch what they thought was like to prove a pretty fight. Men of position were they, for the most part, gentlemen of the Court, with here and there a soldier; and from the manner in which they eyed me, methought they favoured me but little.

Our preparations were brief. The absence of seconds disposed of all formalities; the rain made us impatient to be done, and in virtue of it Canaples pompously announced that he would not risk a cold by stripping. With interest did I grimly answer that he need fear no cold when I had done with him. Then casting aside my cloak, I drew, and professing myself also disposed to retain my doublet, we forthwith engaged.

He was no mean swordsman, this Canaples. Indeed, his reputation was already widespread, and in the first shock of our meeting blades, I felt rumour had been just for once. But I was strangely dispossessed of any doubts touching the outcome; this being due, perchance, to a vain confidence in my own skill, perchance to the spirit of contemptuous raillery wherewith I had from the outset treated the affair, and which had so taken root

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in my heart that even when we engaged, I still, almost unwittingly, persisted in it.

In my face and attitude there was the reflection of this bantering, flippant mood; it was to be read in the mocking disdain of my glance, in the scornful curl of my lip, and even in the turn of my wrist as I put aside my opponent's passes. All this Canaples must have noted, and it was not without effect upon his nerves. Moreover, there is in steel a subtle magnetism which is the index of one's antagonist; and from the moment that our blades slithered one against the other, I make no doubt but that Canaples grew aware of the confident, almost exultant mood in which I met him, and which told him that I was his master. Add unto this the fact that whilst Canaples' nerves were unstrung by passion, mine were held in check by a mind as calm and cool as though our swords were baited, and consider with what advantage I took my ground.

He led the attack fierce and furiously, as if I were a boy whose guard was to be borne down by sheer weight of blows. I contented myself with tapping his blade aside, and when at length, after essaying every trick in his catalogue, he fell back baffled, I laughed a low laugh of derision that drove him pale with fury.

Again he came at me, almost before I was prepared for him, and his point, parried with a downward stroke and narrowly averted, scratched my thigh, but did more damage to my breeches than my skin. In exchange I touched him playfully on the shoulder, and the sting of it drove him back a second time. He was breathing hard by then, and would fain have paused awhile for breath, but I saw no reason to be merciful.

"Now, sir," I cried, saluting him as though our combat were but on the point of starting, "to me! Guard yourself!"

Again our swords clashed, and my blows now fell as swift on his blade as his had done a while ago on mine. So hard did I press him that he was forced to give way before me. Back I drove him, pace by pace, his wrist growing weaker at each parry, each parry growing wider, and the perspiration streaming down his ashen face. Panting he went, in that backward flight before my onslaught, defending himself as best he could, never thinking of a *riposte*, beaten already. Back, and yet back he went, until he reached the railings and could back no farther, and so broken was his spirit then that a groan escaped him. I answered with a laugh—my mood was lusty and cruel—and thrust at him. Then, eluding his guard, I thrust again, beneath it, and took him fairly in the middle of his doublet.

He staggered, dropped his rapier, and caught at the railings, where for a moment he hung swaying and gasping. Then his head fell forward, his grip relaxed, and, swooning, he sank down into a heap.

A dozen sprang to his aid, foremost amongst them being St. Auban and Montmédy, whilst I drew back, suddenly realizing my own spent condition, to which the heat of combat had hitherto rendered me insensible. I mastered myself as best I might, and dissembling my hard breathing, I wiped my blade with a kerchief, an act which looked so calm and callous that it drew from the crowd—for a crowd it had become by then—an angry growl. 'Tis thus with the vulgar; they are ever ready to sympathise with the vanquished without ever pausing to ask themselves if his chatisement may not be merited.

In answer to the growl I tossed my head, and, sheathing my sword, I flung the blood-stained kerchief into their very midst. The audacity of the gesture left them breathless, and they growled no more, but stared.

Then that outrageous fop, Vilmorin, who had been bending over Canaples, started up, and coming towards me with a face that was whiter than that of the prostrate man, he proved himself so utterly bereft of wit by terror, that for once he had the temerity to usurp the words and actions of a brave man.

"You have murdered him," he cried in a strident voice; and, thrusting his clenched fist within an inch of my face, "Do you hear me, you knave? You have murdered him!"

Now, as may be well conceived, I was in no mood to endure such words from any man, so 'twas but natural that for answer I caught the dainty Vicomte a buffet that knocked him into the arms of the nearest bystander and brought him to his senses.

"Fool!" I snarled at him. "Must I make another example before you believe that Gaston de Luynes wears a sword?"

"In the name of Heaven——" he began, putting forth his hands in a beseeching gesture; but what more he said was drowned by the roar of anger that burst from the onlookers, and it was like to have gone ill with me had not St. Auban come to my aid at that most critical juncture.

"Messieurs," he cried, thrusting himself before me, and raising his hand to crave silence, "hear me. I, a friend of M. de Canaples, tell you that you wrong M. de Luynes. 'Twas a fair fight. How the quarrel arose is no concern of yours."

Despite his words they still snarled and growled like the misbegotten curs they were. But St. Auban was famous for the regal supper parties he gave, and to which all were eager to be bidden; and amidst that crowd, as I have said, there were a score or so of gentlemen of the Court, who, with scant regard for the right or wrong of the case, and every regard to conciliate this giver of suppers, came to range themselves beside and around us, and thus protected me from the murderous designs of that rabble.

Seeing how the gentlemen took my part, and deeming, in their blessed ignorance, that what gentlemen did must perforce be well done, they grew calm in the twinkling of an eye. Thereupon St. Auban, turning to me, counselled me in a whisper to be gone whilst the tide of opinion flowed in my favor. Intent to act upon this good advice, I took a step towards the little knot that had collected round Canaples, and with natural curiosity inquired into the nature of his hurt.

'Twas Montmédy who answered me, scowling as he did so.

"He may die of it, Monsieur. If he does not, his recovery at least will be slow and difficult."

I had been wise had I held my peace and gone; but like a fool I must needs give utterance to what was in my mind.

"Ah! At least there will be no duel at St. Germain this evening."

Scarce had the words fallen from my lips than I saw in the faces of Montmédy and St. Auban and half-a-dozen others the evidence of their rashness.

"So!" cried St. Auban in a voice that shook with rage, "that was your object, eh? That you had fallen low, Master de Luynes, I knew; but I dreamt not that in your fall you had come so low as this."

"You dare?"

"Heavens! I dare more, Monsieur, I dare tell you—you, Gaston de Luynes, spy and bravo of the Cardinal, that your object shall be defeated. That, as God lives, this duel shall still be fought—by *me* instead of Canaples."

"And I tell you, sir, that as God lives it shall *not*," I answered with a vehemence not a whit less than his own. "To you and to what other fools may think to follow in your footsteps, I say this, that not to-night nor to-morrow, nor the next day shall that duel be fought. Cowards and poltroons you are, who seek to murder a beardless boy who has injured none of you. But, by my soul, every man who sends a challenge to that boy will I

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at once seek out and deal with as I have dealt with Eugène de Canaples. Let those who are eager to try another world make the attempt. Adieu, Messieurs!"

And with a flourish of my sodden beaver, I turned and left them before they had recovered from the vehemence of my words.

CHAPTER IV.

Fair Rescuers.

Like the calm of the heavens when pregnant with thunder was the calm of that crowd, and as brief as it was; for scarce had I taken a dozen steps when my ears were assailed by a rumble of angry voices and a rush of feet. One glance over my shoulder, one second's hesitation whether I should stay and beard them, then the thought of Andrea de Mancini and of what would befall him did this crowd vent its wrath upon me decided my course, and sent me hot foot down the Rue Monarque. Howling and bellowing, that rabble followed in my wake, stumbling over one another in their indecent haste to reach me.

But I was fleet of foot, and behind me there was that which would lend wings to the most deliberate, so that when I turned into the open space before the Hotel Vendôme, I had set a good fifty yards betwixt myself and the foremost of my hunters.

A coach was passing at that moment. I shouted, and the knave who drove glanced at me, then up the Rue Monarque at my pursuers, whereupon, shaking his head, he would have left me to my fate. But I was of another mind. I dashed towards the vehicle, and as it passed me I caught at the window, which luckily was open, and drawing up my legs I hung there despite the shower of mud which the revolving wheels deposited upon me.

From the bowels of the coach I was greeted by a woman's scream; a pale face and a profusion of fair hair flashed before my eyes.

"Fear not, Madame," I shouted. "I am no assassin, but rather one who stands in imminent peril of assassination, and who craves your protection."

More I would have said, but at that juncture the lash of the coachman's whip curled itself about my shoulders and stung me vilely.

"Get down, you rascal," he bellowed; "get down, or I'll draw rein."

To obey him would have been madness. The crowd surged behind with hoots and yells, and had I let go I must perforce have fallen into their hands. So instead of getting down as he inconsiderately counselled, I drew myself farther up by a mighty effort, and thrust half my body into the coach, whereupon the fair lady screamed again, and the whip caressed my legs. But within the coach sat another woman, dark of hair, and exquisite of face, who eyed my advent with a disdainful glance. Her proud countenance bore the stamp of courage, and to her it was that I directed my appeal.

"Madame, permit me, I pray, to seek shelter in your carriage, and suffer me to journey a little way with you. Quick, Madame! Your coachman is drawing rein, and I shall of a certainty be murdered under your very nose, unless you bid him change his mind. To be murdered in itself is a trifling matter I avow; but it is not nice to behold, and I would not for all the world offend your eyes with the spectacle of it."

Then eluding his guard, I thrust again, and took him fairly in the middle of his doublet.

I had judged her rightly, and my tone of flippant recklessness won me her sympathy and aid. Quickly thrusting her head through the other window, "Drive on, Louis," she commanded. "Faster!" Then turning to me, "You may bring your legs into the coach if you choose, sir," she said.

"Your words, Madame, are the sweetest music I have heard for months," I answered drily, as I obeyed her. Then, leaning out of the carriage again, waved my hat gallantly to the mob, which, now realising the futility of further pursuit, had suddenly come to a halt.

"I hope we shall meet again, gentlemen," I shouted. "Come to me one by one, and I'll keep the devil busy finding lodgings for you."

They answered me with a yell, and I sat down content, and laughed.

"You are not a coward, Monsieur," said the dark lady.

"I have been accounted many unsavoury things, Madame, but my bitterest enemies never dubbed me that."

"Why, then, did you run away?"

"Why? Why, because in the excessive humility of my soul I recognized myself unfit to die."

She bit her lip and her tiny foot beat impatiently upon the floor.

"You are trifling with me, Monsieur. Where do you wish to alight?"

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"Pray let that give you no concern; I can assure you that I am in no haste."

"You become impertinent, sir," she cried angrily. "Answer me, where are you going?"

"Where am I going? Oh, ah—to the Palais Royal."

Her eyes opened very wide at that, and wandered over me with a look that was passing eloquent. Indeed, I was a sorry spectacle for any woman's eyes, particularly a pretty one—splashed from head to foot with mud, my doublet saturated and my beaver dripping, with the feather hanging limp and broken, whilst there was a rent in my breeches that had been made by Canaples' sword. I take it that I had not the air of a courtier, and that when I said that I went to the Palais Royal, she might have justly held me to be the adventurous lover of some kitchen wench. But unto the Palais Royal go others besides courtiers and lovers—spies of the Cardinal, for instance—and in her sudden coldness and the next question that fell from her beauteous lips I read that she had guessed me one of these.

"Why did the mob pursue you, Monsieur?"

There was in her voice and gesture, when she asked a question, the imperiousness of one accustomed to command replies. This pretty queenliness it was that drove me to answer, as I had done before, in a bantering strain.

"Why did the mob pursue me? Hum! Why does the mob pursue great men? Because it loves their company."

Her matchless eyes flashed an angry glance, and the faint smile on my lips must have tried her temper sorely.

"What did you do to deserve this affection?"

"A mere nothing—I killed a man," I answered coolly. "Or, at least, I left him started on the road to—Paradise."

The little flaxen-haired doll uttered a cry of horror, and covered her face with her small white hands. My inquisitor, however, sat rigid and unaffected. My answer had confirmed her suspicions.

"Why did you kill him?"

"Why," I replied, encouraging her thoughts, "because he sought to kill me."

"Ah! And why did he seek to kill you?"

"Because I disturbed him at dinner."

"Have a care how you trifle, sir," she retorted, her eyes kindling again.

"Upon my honour, 'twas no more than that. I pulled the cloth from the table whilst he eat. He was a quick-tempered gentleman, and my playfulness offended him. That is all."

Doubt appeared in her eyes, and it may have entered her mind that perchance her judgment had been overhasty.

"Do you mean, sir, that you provoked a duel?"

"Alas, Madame! It had become necessary. You see, M. de Canaples——"

"Who?" Her voice rang sharp as the crack of a pistol.

"M. de Canaples."

"Was it he whom you killed?"

From her tone and the eager, strained expression of her face, it was not difficult to read that some mighty interest of hers was involved in my reply. It needed not the low moan that burst from her companion to tell me so.

"As I have said, Madame, it is possible that he is not dead—nay, even that he will not die. For the rest, since you ask the question, my opponent was indeed M. de Canaples—Eugène de Canaples."

Her face went deadly white, and she sank back in her seat as if every nerve in her body had of a sudden been bereft of power, whilst she of the fair hair burst into tears.

A pretty position was this for me; luckily it endured not. The girl roused herself from her momentary weakness, and seizing the cord, she tugged it violently. The coach drew up.

"Alight, sir," she hissed. "Go! I wish to Heaven that I had left you to the vengeance of the people."

Not so did I; nevertheless, as I alighted, "I am sorry, Madame, that you did not," I answered. "Farewell!"

The coach moved away, and I was left standing at the corner of the Rue St. Honoré and the Rue des Bons Enfants, in the sorriest frame of mind conceivable. The lady in the coach had saved my life, and for that I was more grateful, perchance, than my life was worth. Out of gratitude sprang a regret for the pain that I had undoubtedly caused her, and the sorrow which it might have been my fate to have cast over her life.

Still, regret, albeit an admirable sentiment, was one whose existence was usually brief in my bosom. Heavens! Had I been a man of regrets, I might have spent the remainder of my days weeping over my past life. But the gods who had given me a character calculated to lead a man into misfortune, had given me a stout heart wherewith to fight that misfortune, and an armour of recklessness against which remorse, regrets, aye, and conscience itself, rained blows in vain.

And so it befel that presently I laughed myself out of the puerile humour that was besetting me, and finding myself chilled by inaction in my wet clothes, I set off for the Palais Royal at a pace that was first cousin to a run.

Ten minutes later I stood in the presence of the most feared and hated man in France.

"What's this?" cried Mazarin as I entered his cabinet. "Have you swum the Seine in your clothes?"

"No, Eminence, but I have been serving you in the rain for the past hour."

He smiled that peculiar smile of his that rendered hateful his otherwise not ill-favoured countenance. It was a smile of the lips in which the eyes had no part.

"Yes," he said slowly, "I have heard of your achievements."

"You have heard?" I ejaculated, amazed by the powers which this man wielded.

"Yes, I have heard. You are a brave man, M. de Luynes."

"Pshaw, Eminence," I deprecated, "the poor are always brave. They have naught to lose but their life, and that is not so sweet to them that they lay much store by it. Howbeit, Monseigneur, your wishes have been carried out. There will be no duel at St. Germain this evening."

"Will there not? Hum! I am not so confident. You are a brave man, M. de Luynes, but you lack that great auxiliary of valour—discretion. What need to fling into the teeth of those fine gentlemen the reason you had for splitting Canaples, eh? You have provoked a dozen enemies for Andrea where only one existed."

"I will answer for all of them," I retorted boastfully.

"Fine words, M. de Luynes, but to support them how many men will you have to kill? Pah! What if some fine morning there comes one who, despite your vaunted swordsmanship, proves your master? What will become of that fool my nephew, eh?"

And his uncanny smile again beamed on me.

"Andrea is now packing his valise. In an hour he will have left Paris secretly. He goes—but what does it signify where he goes. He is compelled by your indiscretion to withdraw from Court. Had you kept a close tongue in your foolish head—but there, you did not, and so by a thoughtless word you undid all that you had done so well. You may go, M. de Luynes; I have no further need of you. And thank Heaven that you leave the Palais Royal free to go whither your fancy takes you, and not to journey to the Bastille or to Vincennes. I am merciful, M. de Luynes—as merciful as you are brave: more merciful than you are prudent. One word of warning, M. de Luynes. Do not let me learn that you

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are in my nephew's company, if you would not make me regret my clemency, and repair the error of it by having you hanged. And now, farewell!"

I stood aghast. Was I indeed dismissed? Albeit naught had been said, I had not doubted since my interview with him that morning that did I succeed in saving Andrea my rank in his Guards, and thereby a means of livelihood, would be restored to me. And now matters were no better than they had been before. He dismissed me with the assurance that he was merciful. It would have been as merciful to have hanged me.

He met my astonished look with an eye that seemed to ask me why I lingered. Then, reading mayhap what was passing in my thoughts, he raised a little silver whistle to his lips and blew softly upon it.

"Bernouin," said he to his valet, who entered in answer to the summons, "reconduct M. de Luynes."

I remember drawing down upon my bedraggled person the curious gaze of the numerous clients who thronged the Cardinal's antechamber, as I followed Bernouin to the door which opened on to the corridor, and which he held open for me. And thus, for the second time within twenty-four hours, did I leave the Palais Royal to wend my way home to the Rue St. Antoine with grim despondency in my heart.

I found Michelot on the point of setting out in search of me, with a note which had been brought to my lodging half-an-hour ago, and which its bearer had said was urgent. I took the letter, and bidding Michelot prepare me fresh raiment that I might exchange for my wet clothes, I broke the seal and read:

A thousand thanks, dear friend, for the service you have rendered me and of which his Eminence, my uncle, has informed me. I fear that you have made many enemies for yourself through an action which is like to go unrewarded, and that Paris is therefore as little suited at present to your health as it is to mine. I am setting out for Blois on a mission of exceeding delicacy, wherein your advice and guidance would be of infinite value to me. I shall remain at Choisy until to-morrow morning, and should there be no ties to hold you in Paris, and you be minded to bear me company, join me there at the *Hôtel du Connétable*, where I shall lie to-night.

Your grateful and very devoted
ANDREA.

So! There was one at least who desired my company! I had not thought it. "If there be no ties to hold you in Paris," he wrote. Ha, ha! A change of air would suit me vastly. I was resolved. A fig for the Cardinal's threat to hang me if I were found in his nephew's company.

"My suit of buff, Michelot," I shouted, springing to my feet, "and my leather jerkin."

He gazed at me in surprise.

"Is Monsieur going a journey?"

I answered him that I was, and as I spoke I began to divest myself of the clothes I wore. "Pack my suit of pearl gray in the valise, with what changes of linen I possess, then call Master Coupri, that I may settle with him. It may be some time before we return."

In less than half-an-hour I was ready for the journey, spurred and booted, with my rapier at my side, and in the pocket of my doublet a purse containing some fifty pistoles, best part of which I had won from Vilmorin, at *lansquenet* some nights before, and which moderate sum represented all the monies that I possessed.

Our horses were ready, my pistols holstered, and my valise strapped to Michelot's saddle. Despite the desperate outlook of my fortunes, of which I had made him fully cognisant, he insisted upon clinging to me, reminding me that at Rocroi I had saved his life, and that he would leave me only when I bade him go.

As four o'clock was striking at Nôtre Dame we crossed the Pont Neuf, and going by the Quai des Augustins and the Rue de la Harpe, we quitted Paris by the St. Michel Gate, and took the road to Choisy. The rain had ceased, but the air was keen and cold, and the wind cut like a sword-edge.

CHAPTER V.

Mazarin the Matchmaker.

'Twixt Paris and Choisy there lies but a distance of some two leagues, which, given a fair horse, one may cover with ease in little more than half-an-hour; so that as the twilight was deepening into night we drew rein before the hostelry of the *Connétable*, in the only square the little township boasts, and from the landlord I had that obsequious reception which is ever accorded to him who travels with a body-servant.

I found Andrea installed in a fair-sized and comfortable apartment, to the original decoration of which he added not a little by bestowing his boots in the centre of the floor; his hat, sword, and baldrick on the table; his cloak on one chair, and his doublet on another. He himself lay toasting his feet before the blazing logs, which cast a warm, reddish glow upon his sable hair and dainty shirt of cambric.

He sprang up as I entered, and came towards me with a look of pleasure on his handsome, high-bred face that did me good to see.

"So you have come, de Luynes," he cried, putting forth his hand. "I did not dare to hope that you would."

"No?" I answered. "Truly it was not to be expected that I could be easily lured from Paris just as my fortunes are nearing a high tide, and his Eminence proposing to make me a Marshal of France and create me Duke. As you say, you had scant grounds for hoping that my love for you would suffice to make me renounce all these fine things for the mere sake of accompanying you on your jaunt to Blois."

He laughed, then fell to thanking me for having rid him of Canaples. I cut him short at last, and in answer to his questions told him what had passed 'twixt his Eminence and me that afternoon. Then as the waiter entered to spread our supper, the conversation assumed a less delicate character, until we were again alone, with the table and its steaming viands between us.

"You have not told me yet, Andrea, what takes you to Blois," quoth I then.

"You shall learn. Little do you dream how closely interwoven are our morning adventures with this journey of mine. To begin with I go to Blois to pay my respects to the lady whom his Eminence has selected for my future wife."

"You were right then in describing this as a mission of great delicacy."

"More than you think. I have never seen the lady."

"Never seen her? And you go a-wooing a woman you have never seen?"

"It is so. I have never seen her; but his Eminence has, and 'tis he who arranges the affair. Ah, the Cardinal is the greatest matchmaker in France. My cousin Anna Martinozzi is destined for the Prince de Conti, my sisters Olympia and Marianne he also hopes to marry to princes of the blood, whilst I dare wager that he has thoughts of seating either Maria or Hortensia upon the throne of France as the wife of Louis XIV., as soon as his Majesty shall have reached a marriageable age. You may laugh, de Luynes, nevertheless all this may come to pass, for my uncle has great ambitions for his family; and it is even possible that should that poor, wandering youth, Charles II. of England, ever return to the throne of his fathers, he may also become my brother-in-law. I am like to become well connected, de Luynes, so make a friend of me whilst I am humble. So much for Mazarin's nieces. His nephews are too young for alliances just yet, saving myself; and for me his Eminence has chosen one of the

greatest heiresses in France—Yvonne St. Albaren de Canaples."

"Whom?" I shouted.

He smiled.

"Curious, is it not? She is the sister of the man whom I quarrelled with this morning, and whom you fought with this afternoon. Now you will understand my uncle's reasons for so strenuously desiring to prevent the duel at St. Germain. It appears that the old Chevalier de Canaples is as eager as the Cardinal to see his daughter wed to me, for his Eminence has promised to create me duke for a wedding gift. 'Twill cost him little, and 'twill please these Canaples mightily. Naturally, had Eugène de Canaples and I crossed swords, matters would have been rendered difficult."

"When did you learn all this?" I inquired.

"To-day, after the duel, and when it was known what St Auban and Montemédy had threatened me with. My uncle thought it well that I should withdraw from Paris. He sent for me and told me what I have told you, adding that I had best seize the opportunity, whilst my presence at Court was undesirable, to repair to Blois and get my wooing done. I in part agreed with him. The lady is very rich, and I am told that she is beautiful. I shall see her, and if she pleases me I'll woo her. If not, I'll return to Paris."

"But her brother will oppose you."

"Her brother? Pooh! If he doesn't die of the sword-thrust you gave him, which I am told is in the region of the lung and passing dangerous, he will at least be abed for a couple of months to come."

"But I, my dear André? What *rôle* do you reserve for me that you have desired me to go with you?"

"The *rôle* of Mentor, if you will. Methought you would prove a merry comrade to help one o'er a tedious journey, and knowing that there was little to hold you in Paris, and probably sound reasons why you should desire to quit it, methought that perhaps you would consent to bear me company. Who knows, my knight errant, what adventures may await you and what fortunes? If the heiress displeases me, it may be that she shall please you; or mayhap there is another heiress at Blois who will fall enamoured of those fierce moustachios!"

I laughed with him—at the improbability of such things befalling. I carried in my bosom too large a heart, and one that was the property of every wench I met, for just so long as I chanced to be in her company.

"And I, sir, did but slap yours as one may slap a misbehaving urchin's, that he may learn better manners."

It was no more than in harmony with this habit of mine that when next morning in the common-room of the *Connêtable* I espied Jeanneton, the landlord's daughter, and remarked that she was winsome and shapely, with a complexion that would not have dishonoured a rose petal, I permitted myself to pinch her dainty cheek. She slapped mine in return, and in this pleasant manner we became acquainted.

"Sweet Jeanneton," quoth I with a laugh, "that was mightily ill-done. I did but pinch your cheek as one may pinch a sweet-smelling bud, so that the perfume of it may cling to one's fingers."

"And I, sir," was the pert rejoinder, "did but slap yours as one may slap a misbehaving urchin's, so that he may learn better manners."

Nevertheless she was pleased with my courtly speech, and perchance also with my moustachios, for a smile took the place of the frown wherewith she had first confronted me. Now if I had uttered glib pleasantries in answer to her frowns, how many more did not her smiles wring from me? I discoursed to her, in the very courtliest fashion, of cows and pullets, and such other matters as interesting to her as they were mysterious to me. I questioned her in a breath touching her father's pigs and the swain she loved best in that little township, to all of which she answered me with a charming wit, which would greatly divert you did I but recall her words sufficiently to set them down. In five minutes we were become the best friends in the world, which was attested by the protecting arm that I slipped round her waist as I asked her whether she loved that village swain of hers better than she

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loved me, and refused to believe her when she answered that she did.

Outside two men were talking, one calling for a farrier, and when informed that the only one in the village was absent and not like to return till noon, demanded relays of horses. The other, probably the hostler, answered him that the *Connêtable* was not a post-house, and that no horses were to be had there. Then a woman's voice, sweet yet commanding, rose above theirs.

"Very well, Guilbert," it said. "We will await this farrier's return."

"Let me go, Monsieur," cried Jeanneton. "Some one comes."

Now for myself I cared little who might come, but methought that it was like to do poor Jeanneton's fair name no benefit if the arm of Gaston de Luynes were seen about her waist, and so I obeyed her; but not quickly enough, for already a shadow lay athwart the threshold, and in the doorway stood a woman, whose eye took in the situation before we had altered it sufficiently to avert suspicion. To my amazement I beheld the lady of the coach, she who had saved me from the mob in Place Vendôme, and touching whose identity I could have hazarded a shrewd guess.

In her eyes, also, I saw the light of recognition, which swiftly changed to one of scorn. Then they passed from me to the vanishing Jeanneton, and methought that she was about to call her back. She paused, however, and turning to the lackey who followed at her heels, "Guilbert," she said, "be good enough to call the landlord, and bid him provide me with an apartment for the time that we may be forced to spend here."

But at this juncture the host himself came hurrying forward with many bows and endless rubbing of hands, which argued untold deference. He regretted that the hostelery of the *Connêtable*, being but a poor inn, seldom honoured as it was at that moment, possessed but one suite of private apartments, and that now occupied by a most noble gentleman. The lady tapped her foot, and as at that moment her companion, who was none other than the fair-haired doll I had seen with her on the previous day, entered the room, she turned to speak with her, whilst I moved away towards the window.

"Will this gentleman," she inquired, "lend me one of his rooms, 'think you?"

"Alas, Mademoiselle, he has but two, a bedroom and an antechamber, and he is still abed."

"Oh!" she cried in pretty anger, "this is insufferable! 'Tis your fault, Guilbert, you fool. Am I then to spend the day here in the common room?"

"No, no, Mademoiselle," exclaimed the host in his most soothing accents. "Only for an hour, or less perhaps, until this very noble lord is risen, when assuredly—for he is young and very gallant—he will resign one or both of his rooms to you."

More was said between them, but my attention was suddenly drawn elsewhere. Michelot burst into the room, disaster written on his face.

"Monsieur," he cried, in great alarm, "the Marquis de St. Auban is riding down the street with the Vicomte de Vilmorin and another gentleman."

I rapped out an oath at the news: they had got scent of Andrea's whereabouts, and were after him like sleuth-hounds on a trail.

"Remain here, Michelot," I answered in a low voice. "Tell them that M. de Mancini is not here; that the only occupant of the inn is your master, a gentleman from Normandy, or Picardy, or where you will. See that they do not guess our presence, the landlord, fortunately, is ignorant of M. de Mancini's name."

There was a clatter of horses' hoofs without, and I was barely in time to escape by the door leading to the staircase, when St. Auban's heavy voice rang out, calling the landlord.

"I am in search of a gentleman named Andrea de Mancini," he said. "I am told that he has journeyed hither, and that he is here at present. Am I rightly informed?"

I determined to remain where I was and hear that conversation to the end.

There is a gentleman here," answered the host, "but I am ignorant of his name. I will inquire."

"You may spare yourself the trouble," Michelot interposed. "That is not the gentleman's name. I am his servant."

There was a moment's pause, then came Vilmorin's shrill voice. "You lie, knave. M. de Mancini is here. You are M. de Luynes' lackey, and where the one is, there shall we find the other."

"M. de Luynes?" came a voice unknown to me. "That is Mancini's sword-blade of a friend, is it not? Well? Why does he hide himself? Where is he? Where is your master, rascal?"

"I am here, Messieurs," I answered, throwing wide the door, and appearing, grim and arrogant, upon the threshold.

Merciful Heavens! Had they beheld the devil, St. Auban and Vilmorin could not have looked less pleased than they did when their eyes lighted upon me, standing there surveying them with a sardonic grin.

St. Auban muttered an oath; Vilmorin stifled a cry; whilst he who had so loudly called to know where I hid myself, a frail little fellow, in the uniform of the *gardes du corps*, stood now silent and abashed.

The two women, who had withdrawn into a dark and retired corner of the apartment, stood gazing with interest upon this pretty scene.

"Well, gentlemen," I asked in a bantering tone, as I took a step towards them, "have you naught to say to me now that I have answered your imperious summons? What! All dumb?"

"Our affair is not with you," said St. Auban curtly.

"Your pardon! Why, then did you inquire where I was?"

"Messieurs," exclaimed Vilmorin, whose face assumed the pallor usual to it in moments of peril, "methinks we have been misinformed, and that M. de Mancini is not here. Let us seek elsewhere."

"Most excellent advice, gentlemen," I commented. "Seek elsewhere."

"Monsieur," cried the little officer, turning purple, "it occurs to me that you are mocking us."

"Mocking you! Mocking *you?* Mocking a gentleman who has been tied to so huge a sword as yours? Surely—surely, sir, you do not think——"

"I'll not endure it," he broke in. "You shall answer to me for this."

"Have a care, sir," I cried in alarm as he rushed forward. "Have a care, sir, lest you trip over your sword."

He halted, drew himself up, and with a magnificent gesture, "I am Armand de Malpertuis, lieutenant of his Majesty's Guards," he announced, "and I shall be grateful if you will do me the honour of taking a turn with me outside."

"I am flattered beyond measure, M. Malappris——"

"Mal-per-tuis," he corrected furiously.

"Malpertuis," I echoed. "I am honoured beyond words, but I do not wish to take a turn."

"Good Heavens, sir! Don't you understand? We must fight."

"Must we, indeed? Again I am honoured; but, Monsieur, I don't fight sparrows."

(To be continued.)

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A FALSE ENTRY.

"HERE we are at last, father. Now do please be careful what you talk about, and above all, try to forget that such things as sausages exist, or, at any rate, that you have anything to do with them."

"I'll try to, Effie, I'll try to, my dear, but when I've thought about them for the last thirty years it's a bit hard to put them out of my mind now, but I'll try my best, my girl."

The train stopped, and Effie Larkins and her father got out, to fall the prey of the motley group of porters, commissionaires and envoys of the various hotels of Lausanne. He was a jolly-looking, grey-haired man of perhaps fifty-five or sixty, and she a lively, if not actually pretty, brown-haired, brown-eyed girl of twenty-three or so.

And while an English-speaking porter is piloting them and their luggage safely through the Customs, we may as well learn how they found their way to Switzerland, and why Mr. Larkins was forbidden to forget that the succulent dainties known as sausages, existed.

Samuel Larkins had begun life as an errand boy in a sausage shop, he had worked hard and prospered, and for many years now he had himself been the owner of a large shop in the Borough devoted entirely to the sale of sausages, of which he was also the maker.

"Larkins' sausages" enjoyed enormous local favour, and Samuel Larkins was quite rich enough to indulge his only daughter in any reasonable wish. Her wish was to visit Switzerland, and so they came. His wife was dead, and Effie, his only child, the apple of his eye. She had been educated at an excellent school, and on her return home, could not but be struck by the very homely surroundings and manners of her father.

She would have liked to move from the neighbourhood, but on this one point her otherwise indulgent father was firm. He had lived over his sausage shop for twenty-five years, he had brought his wife home to it on their wedding day, Effie had been born there—"and I'll die there," he asserted, so Effie was forced to content herself by effecting a complete metamorphosis of the shabby rooms and old-fashioned furniture, with the sole exception of the room behind the shop which was her father's particular sanctum, and into which even she never penetrated. He adored his daughter, and lavished all he could upon her.

For himself he would have preferred remaining in London and superintending the making and selling of his sausages, but he realised that young people need change, and as he could not bear to be parted from Effie, he bought the tickets, made the journey, and found himself safely arrived at the end of it.

His daughter's warning was perhaps needed, for her father took an honest pride in his occupation, and was fond of boasting that nothing but the best ingredients found a place in *his* sausages.

The luggage passed, they took a carriage and drove to the pension where they had engaged rooms. A short time after their arrival, according to the Swiss law, whereby the authorities must be at once supplied with the name, address, and occupation of every visitor, the proprietor brought up the visitors' book. This was an anxious moment for Effie. With all her fastidious little heart she hated the idea of being in any way connected with sausages. At home, of course, everybody knew it, and disguise was useless, but here, what need to proclaim the fact! She watched her father write "Samuel Larkins, London," and then his pen travelled on to the space headed "Occupation." The first "s" of the hated word was formed before her resolution was made.

"Stop," she called out suddenly, "I will put it," and before the bewildered man could speak she had changed the "s" into a "g" and, according to the visitors' book, Samuel Larkins had no other occupation than that of being "a gentleman."

His expostulations were coaxed away. "It doesn't really make any difference," she assured him, "no one will trouble to read it. It is only a joke, you can't make the page all untidy by scratching it out," and the adoring father gave in, though not without some qualms as to the sin of inscribing what he bluntly called a lie.

The time passed delightfully at Lausanne, with trips on the blue lake, excursions to the neighbouring towns, a visit to Montreux to see the "*Fete de Narcisses*," where one is driven to believe that all the narcissi in Switzerland have found their way to the sunny little town, so assailed is one on every side by the sight of them, and the scent of their sweetness. There were several excursion parties made up by the visitors at the pension, and Effie and her father were always invited to join, for she was an amusing, thoroughly nice girl, and he had a certain bluff heartiness about him hard to resist.

He kept his word faithfully to his daughter, and the much-disliked word had not been spoken, so she breathed freely, and gave herself up to enjoyment.

The people staying in the pension were an endless amusement to her; there was an old English lady (to be found, surely, in every pension abroad) who, by virtue of long residence has come to regard herself as queen of the house, who arranges excursions, makes conversation, and graciously sets, or tries to set, newcomers at their ease, who holds a species of court in the salon each evening, and believes herself to be a person of some importance. Then, too, there was the ultra-English lady, who aggressively aired their superiority over all others to a roomful of foreigners, but who found nothing good once the shores of Britain were behind her.

There was also the fussy dame, the vagaries of whose digestion were a source of keenest joy to her, of woe to her neighbours when compelled to listen to her account of them. She "enjoyed bad health," as an old Wiltshire woman once happily expressed it, and sat at meals with a pair of scales by her side, with which she conscientiously and obtrusively weighed every mouthful. There were yet other types; the lady who sat waiting (figuratively speaking) to be cheated, who disputed every item of her account and talked for an hour on the thieving propensities of the entire Swiss nation, because her laundress charged fifteen instead of ten centimes for washing a collar.

The list might be extended almost indefinitely if it were not wearying and almost pathetic to find so many women with no object, no interest in life, save

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the petty scandals and trivialities of pension existence. In the whole pension there was only one man, but he, in the opinion of the ladies, made up for being the only one, by possessing a title.

The Honourable Robert Murgatroyd was the nephew of the fussy lady with the interesting digestion, and he was in Lausanne to regain his strength after a severe illness. He found the pension woefully dull, and welcomed the arrival of the Larkins with enthusiasm. From the rooms they occupied, and their mode of living he could not fail to see that they were well off, and his aunt did not omit to impress it on him.

"The old man," she said, "mayn't be much to look at, but he is a gentleman—I know, because I looked in the visitors' book. It is odd he speaks so badly and gets so often confused over his grammar and aspirates, but I suppose he was badly educated. However, the girl is very nice, and as she is the only child, she will come in for all the money, and I am told he must be really very well off."

But Robert Murgatroyd was no fool. He felt sure that Effie's father was no more a gentleman either by birth or education, than he was a Turk, and he had no intention of doing more than amuse himself with a quite unknown girl, possessing an impossible father. So he talked to her in a low-toned voice in corners, gave her flowers and bon-bons, and in fine made himself so agreeable that poor Effie, simple as a child, innocent as a baby, quite thought he was in love with her, and wove happy dreams of herself as the Honourable Mrs. Murgatroyd.

Her father was equally guileless; he regarded the flirtation with which Robert Murgatroyd filled up his many dull hours as genuine love-making. He had visions of Effie in a golden coronet, driving in a carriage and pair, perhaps even with four horses, to visit him in his sausage shop. So vague were his ideas about Society that he even believed she might be called the Honourable Lady Effie.

So he dreamed on in his loving, ignorant way, and Effie, though she hardly loved, yet was fascinated and charmed by the brilliant young man.

But one day a look in her eyes which had never been there before, an inflection in her voice which he had never before heard, warned the man that he had gone far enough. He packed his luggage, and left that night for England.

That same night, while Murgatroyd was settling himself comfortably in the Paris express, Mr. Larkins sat in his room, thinking deeply, and somewhat miserably. He could not help knowing that he was unpolished and uncouth as compared with other people in the house, and he had lately taken into his head the idea that Murgatroyd despised him. Personally he cared nothing for the young man's opinion, but he believed Effie loved him, and her happiness was the one thing he most desired. He half suspected that Murgatroyd knew and sneered at his business, and he felt that while he was in evidence his daughter might never receive a direct proposal. The result of his meditations was a letter which was handed to Effie the following morning, with another in an unknown handwriting, when the maid brought her coffee.

"From father," she thought wonderingly, "whatever made him write to me? Can he be ill?" and she tore the envelope open. Tears sprang to her eyes as she read the few badly-expressed, strangely-spelt words, in which her father told her he could never be good enough to have to do with the wife of what he called "a honourable gent," how he was sure Murgatroyd was withheld from proposing to her by his presence, and how he intended to return to London without delay, leaving her in the care of Mrs. Stanton, the proprietress of the pension, who would gladly look after her.

"And you needn't be afraid, my dearie," the letter finished, "I won't come to the wedding or nothing, and it will be as if you had no father except for settlements, and that I'll see to well, for you're all I have in the world, and that's why I'm going, because he won't propose while I'm here, and I love you too well to stand in the way of you being made a lady."

Effie sat and cried, never before had she realised the deep love her father had for her, never till now, when, for what he thought her advantage, he proposed giving her up. All the oddities of speech and manner which had often irritated and offended her were forgotten, and she remembered only his sterling goodness, and unfailing love and tenderness. Murgatroyd did not enter her head at all.

Impulsively she threw on her dressing-gown, and ran to her father's room, where he was stuffing his belongings into a portmanteau in a sad and preoccupied way. She threw her arms round his neck. "Father, my dear, good, kind little father, how *could* you think I could live without you. If Mr. Murgatroyd wants to marry me, he must be friends with you too."

Her father did not answer; he was so delighted to find how she loved him, that his voice was trembling, and he could only stroke her hair and kiss her.

Suddenly Effie remembered the other letter, which she still held in her hand, and she tore it open.

"Dear Miss Larkins,—I am obliged to return to England on urgent business, and have not even time to say good-bye to you. I am very much obliged for all the pleasure I have had in the society of your father and yourself during my visit here.

"With kind regards to him and yourself, believe me to remain, yours sincerely, ROBERT MURGATROYD."

"Look," she cried, "that is what you would have liked me to take instead of you. He meant nothing; I understand it all now. He was only amusing himself with me because he had nothing else to do. Thank Heaven I never grew to really love him. Oh, father, I am tired of Lausanne, let us go home."

"Yes, little girl, we'll go home to-day. I'm tired of being abroad, too. Give me old England. Never mind, my darling, don't bother your pretty head any more about it; run away and pack."

They left Lausanne that evening, but before going Samuel Larkins said to his daughter.

"Effie, there's one little thing I'd like to do. You know when we first came you wrote down in the book that I was a gentleman. It's been on my mind ever since; it seems to me nothing but a false entry. I'd be happier if it was altered."

And Effie, understanding now that to be written down a gentleman is not always a proof of being one, agreed.

"You shall do just as you like, dear father," she said tenderly, "it was only my silly vanity that made me write it."

So the book was obtained, and the alteration made, and to this day those who stay at the Pension X. may, if so minded, turn back the pages of the visitors' book to where is written "Samuel Larkins, London, gentleman," but the last word is scratched through, and over it is written in slightly tremulous characters, "sausage-maker."

CLAUDIA ASHTON.

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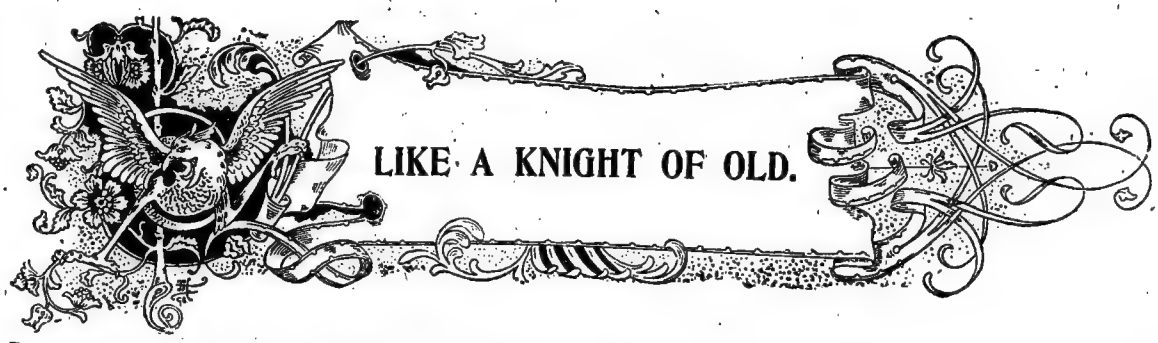

LIKE A KNIGHT OF OLD.

It was of no use Peggy crying, she couldn't go. Millions of tears, she assured herself despairingly, would make no difference—she couldn't, couldn't go!

The certainty with which she said, almost screamed, this truth might have shown her to be a philosopher, had she not at the same moment proved herself to be so very much the reverse, by burying her face deep in the tumbled bed, and doing her best to shed another million or so of these same "idle tears."

As there was no one at hand to sympathise with her she presently stopped and took breath, then wrestled fruitlessly with her pocket for a handkerchief, and failing to find it either on or under the bed, sighed grievously, and in sheer absence of mind wiped one poor red eye with the sheet and the other with a wisp of hair that was hanging wet and matted on her forehead.

The most bitter part of it all was, that the day was so brilliant; the little white clouds looked like wings of doves nestling against the deep blue of the sky, and her window, high though it was in the school-house, could not keep one rustling branch of an elm from whispering and waving at the lowest pane. Birds lived in its hollows and were twittering and carolling there, the children's voices below in the orchard were laughing in expectant happiness—one called her name—and yet, oh, it was hard, she couldn't go.

"If I'd been bad-tempered now!" broke out Peggy afresh, addressing herself to the round knob of the bedstead, but turning her eyes away as suddenly, finding its brazen surface but a poor reflector. "If I'd been bad-tempered like Archie or had broken the best looking-glass like Polly Walker, it would be right, quite right. But just because I hadn't a pair of boots! Oh, dear, oh, dear, why must I be punished when it isn't my fault?" And finding, as so many of her elders daily do, no answer to this sad question, she began crying afresh, but more gently, as if getting used to her sorrow.

The door opened without a knock, and Bessie the one maid, looked in, drying her hands on her coloured apron.

"Is there no way Miss Peggy, dear? Till my month comes round I've nothin' but what I stand upright in, but my heart ached while I packed their sangwidges. I b'lieve I cried on the salt, and spilt the lot!"

"No, Bess, thank you. It can't be helped. Nobody's to blame, and I wouldn't have mother know—but, oh, isn't it horrid to be poor?"

"And this a lady's school, that's the worst. Else you might run barefoot to-day, and be as happy as a bird."

Peggy was silent, turning over in her mind many things, principally questions to which her puzzled brain had no answer whatever. Life seemed such a tangle already, and a cheap school a never ending—so it seemed—and drudging misery, lit up, however, and saved as it were during the monotonous holiday-less year by about three dazzling red-letter days. On these, the father of a large family of boys and girls took every one in the house up the mountains behind the orchard for a picnic on which wonderful occasions the word "Allowance" was banished, and peace, plenty, liberty and laughter were the order of the day, the children forgetting in the freedom of the hour the narrowness and rigour and meanness awaiting them on the morrow.

Bessie's next remark, though meant kindly, was not a happy one.

"Missis 'ud no doubt lend you a pair—she's got two—if your mother didn't owe her such a lot for—"

The blood flew into Peggy's face with a rush, and her eye—quite tearless now—flashed up indignantly into the placidly astonished face of her humble friend.

"Shut up!" she cried, or rather commanded, in loud hysterical tones. But upon Bessie jerking from the room and slamming the door, Peggy—her strength quite gone—hugged her knees with her long arms in an agony, and hid her burning face down on them.

"Oh, mother—mother, dearie—if you only knew!"

Half-an hour passed, but she did not move. Her thin shoes worn down at the heel, and "out" at each little toe had both somehow shuffled themselves off and left her feet uncovered; for Peggy's dress was still short, too short for a girl in her sixteenth year.

She had heard it all so cruelly, so clearly through the open window, the preparations, the dragging of the luncheon baskets by the boys—Archie and his big brother Jim—along the gravel path, the skurrying of many feet down the stairs, Hettie's voice calling to Laura, Laura's to Polly, and Polly too happy for ordinary spoken words, singing back a reply. Then the hasty careless good-bye shouted to her and Bessie, amid more laughter and chatter, the voices finally dying away, leaving silence, broken only by the songs of the birds, which seemed so much to her that Peggy threw her frock over her head to shut the glad sounds out. So effectually did she do this, so drowsily overcome was she by all that had happened, that a loud heavy tread in the hall below, on the stairs, outside on the landing, at her very door, failed to rouse or even reach her. A quick decided rap followed—but there was no answer; a sharp rattle of the handle had been repeated three times before Peggy, wondering—her heart a little fluttering for it seemed as if help had come, peeped over the hem of her dress and set her back resolutely to the window. Then she cried in a succession of little gasps—

"Jim, not you, really! Silly old boy—come in." The handle gave one more twist, and the door was flung back, rebounding against the wall.

Yes it was Jim, hot from running, his face red and shining, his curly hair rough and disordered, his best blue tie awry, his eye—which matched it in colour—

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after one comprehensive glance fastened upon the mat, his hands behind him.

Peggy said not a word, but a little light, half-hope, half-merriment, glimmered in her eye. It was not in her mind to be coquettish with Jim, but neither was she going to help him at all, so she just folded her hands and waited. A minute he stood bearing it, his cheek growing a duskier red, his chest visibly heaving, his right foot shuffling a grotesque *pas seul* round his left. He snatched another look at Peggy, pulled his cap over his eyes still intent on the mat, and blurted out:

"Come along out of that, Pegs! I'm not going without you."

"I was wondering if you could, Jim—and after a year's absence too! But you dear silly old boy, I can't go barefooted like Mrs. Kelly's children. They'd send me back if I did."

"I know they would," growled Jim.

"Well, then, I can't go. You couldn't carry me to the top of Grube!"

Peggy ducked her head, conscious of having laid a trap, and Jim looked up at the landing ceiling as if in search of it. The spirit of his first compliment hung upon his lips, but so utterly confounded and paralysed them that it never escaped beyond, and when, after a pause, he did speak, his voice sounded quite gruff—almost angry.

"Carry you! I suppose you think me a fool, Peggy; but I'm not, and you're not a baby either. I ran back to tell you to come, and I've brought you a pair of my boots to come in. Here they are. The hand behind threw itself forward with a swing, and deposited them with a mighty thud at her feet. Peggy looked at them a moment silently, and at her shame-faced deliverer still panting as if for breath, and then burst into a merry little peal of laughter. It was not to be wondered at either, considering how pretty and arched her foot was, how slender and how small, and to picture them encased in such rough coverings. They had row upon row underneath of bright nails, and the leather was of that strong kind requiring no lining, long strips of the same substance brown and unbreakable hung from brass hooks for laces, and solid masses of metal almost covered the heels. Many a time Peggy had laughed at them, and at their like hanging in lines outside the Douglas shoemakers' shops, and as she slid, almost jumped into this pair of Jimmy's, her glee knew no bounds.

In the midst of laughter, which still had some traces of tears in it, she bestowed a little impetuous kiss upon the hard crinkled top edge of each, and then seizing Jim's reluctant hand, would have rewarded it in like manner had he not been too quick for her and jerked it away.

But he knelt at her feet and tied the laces round them and stowed away the ends quite tidily.

"Worst of it is, your foot's so small," said he at last. Then turning his eyes up to hers for the first time—

"But I swore you should go, Peggy, and so you can now. And if the brutish things do hurt, I'll—well, I *will* carry you all the way back!"

* * * * *

The weight was only fun at first, and the curious roominess which allowed her toes free action even while her ankles were stung by the tightness of the laces (which alone prevented her from dropping off her boots altogether) was a subject of merriment to them both for the first hour. It is true they rather rubbed her heel awkwardly, and they had a trick also of throwing her forward on her knees unexpectedly, but Jim was ever ready to help her, and succeeded in less than an hour in getting her up the steep hill to where the whole party was resting, previous to unpacking the luncheon baskets.

Peggy, at sight of them, grew grave, and suddenly sank, not this time extending her hand with "just to be helped."

"No, Jim; oh, I can't. Let me rest; the heather is like a soft bed, and—oh, each foot weighs a hundred pounds!"

Nobody regarded her much except Nettie, who, with a pleasant little smile, came down to know how it had all been made possible, and then returned with Jim for sandwiches and cake. Shouts of laughter followed her narration, and two of the boys came down to inspect "Madame Peggy's big boots." But before they could reach her, long quick striding steps over-took them, and in another moment they retraced theirs, howling.

Peggy lay on her back, the soft heather almost covering her and rising inches above her head. She forgot she was in pain; everything was so beautiful.

"Clever boy, you got here first. But why did they cry? You hadn't a hand to hurt them left."

"No," responded Jim laconically, "but I had a *foot!*"

The corners of Peggy's mouth twitched, but she asked no explanation, and perched up on one arm, contentedly munched a sandwich. Jim poured out a glass of water, holding the bottle on high that he made quite a fine "head."

"Guess who's up there with them," he said then.

She paused on the verge of another bite.

"Not—— Oh, Jim, don't say it's Charlie Sparrow!"

Noting her tone of concern he immediately became curiously hard and even callous; ungrammatical as well. He set his teeth and spoke through them.

"Yes—him." And then appearing to entirely forget her presence, deliberately, slowly and exasperatingly, demolished two more sandwiches and three pieces of cake without looking at her.

Now Peggy's case was a hard one. For she had told her own heart for at least half-a-year, and had even confided the same to Laura not a month back, that she had a hero, and that hero's initials were C. S.

She had moreover learnt "Charlie is my darling," until she knew every word of it and every little turn of its pretty tune. In that dreary school, where he was a visitor sometimes in the summer, he brought the sunshine more surely than the season did to this lonely girl, who treasured his every kind word, and magnified his slightest acts of courtesy into almost deeds of chivalry. Once, indeed, he had saved her from being beaten; once again he had taken her away into safe hiding while he mended with his own hand a tear in her frock, while she stood by trembling, frightened and helpless, although superlatively happy.

He had told her she was like his sister, his favourite sister too, and when she had cried because he was going away a year ago he had put his arm round her and had kissed her—once, twice—on the forehead, and had begged her to remember him for another year.

She was thinking of that now; of how she'd often pictured his visit, she knowing before and fully prepared, with a new dress two inches longer and more womanly in make, her hair daintily arranged and tied with ribbon, and on her feet sweet clocked stockings, and—oh, dreadful—oh, terrible—disaster of disasters! she was about to meet him now, her hero, her darling, in the

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same old worn dress, her hair rough and untied, and on her feet these hideous lumbering *comic* boots of Jim's!

Far away into the heather she threw the crust of bread in her hand, and up in a moment she stood erect, though wincing with acute pain.

"Jim, dear, help me! I mean to go back—he hasn't seen me—he is only just joining them; perhaps he doesn't know I'm here. Quick! I can't let him see me!"

With a resolve to bear unflinchingly the cutting pain in her feet and ankles, she tore quickly past him down the incline at a break-neck pace, her hands clenched, her face a-flame, her hair flying round it!

With one lightning look of anger at the cause of all this change, Jim sprang up and in a moment overtook her.

"Peggy, stop! Oh what a fool I was—your feet are bleeding! What a blind idiot I was! I never knew—oh, Peggy, forgive me!"

"You dear old Jim, how should you know. Girls have such silly soft feet, and—oh, Jim——"

"What is it, Peggy?"

"Can one die of pain in one's toes and heels, do you think? It's just like being tipsy—and it's all going to my head! What's that?"

Jim looked back and was again ungrammatical. "That's him!" Then under his breath, "dash him!" But Peggy did not hear. Far behind them rang a clear voice calling her name, and the music of it made her little heart thump and her little brain whirl.

"Peggy!" it cried "Peggy, dear, stop!"

But she only ran the faster.

"Jim—take my arm—just to reach my room—see the house is in sight. Only to pass the firs now, and then the orchard, and then—oh, dear—oh, Jim, save me!"

The hands unclenched, the heavy feet dragged and stumbled, her eyes drooped and closed, and in a moment more she lay quivering and senseless at his feet.

Jim knelt, and with his penknife cut from top to bottom the tightly drawn laces, and then, so gently that his hand twitched as he did it, he lifted each foot out of its cruel prison, calling himself the hardest names he knew the while. Directly after, Charlie had caught up to him, and was kneeling too, holding Peggy's inanimate hand.

"I am sorry for this, Jim. Poor little girl—and on the holiday too. I wonder what's caused it."

"Why, I have, if you want to know!" said Jim fiercely. "She's got no boots, and I couldn't see her left behind, so made her wear mine. And I wish somebody 'ud knock my brains out with the thick end of 'em!"

Charlie bit his lip, but slipped hisa rm very kindly through Jim's, not at all rebuffed by his rough reception.

"I hope to do something better than that for you, Jim. But first, Peggy. We can't leave her here. Her poor little feet can do no more walking to-day. I am taller than you, and two years older. I'll carry her home."

Charlie was springing lightly up without noticing the gathering storm in the other's face. Before his hand again touched Peggy's, before he could well realise what had taken place, he found himself in an instant thrown backwards on a bed of rough brake or coarse fern. Jim stood above him irate and towering.

"Touch her if you dare! It's through me she's lying there, as if she was dead—it's through me she has lamed herself, and is cut and bleeding, and it will be through me, and only me, that she shall get back home."

Without any pause or word of apology he stooped and picked her up, letting her lie stretched across his arms like an infant, and with a few steady long strides was out of sight.

Everyone was kind that night to Peggy.

* * * * *

"That is the best of being a little ill," she said. "People half believe they love you then."

"Some of them do," whispered Charlie, and Peggy's eyes grew wistful and dreamy, thinking of the going back for good in the autumn, and of how near *his* house was to her own dear home. But it was not his name she mentioned when she spoke next, for a pang like remorse made her heart heavy.

"Where's Jim?" she said, and Charlie rose to look for him. She caught his wrist:

"Are you angry with him at all?" But he only laughed.

"Angry? No. I deserve more than I got for attempting to take his place."

Jim came, confused and silent.

"Good night, dear Jim."

"Good night, Peg."

She raised herself as well as the bandaged feet would let her, and opened her arms wide.

"Jim—you dear, dear Jim! Let me kiss you!"

He stooped to her and her arms twined round his neck and held him close, but he never returned her kiss, and there was no smile on his lip when she released him.

"Good night, Peg," he said again, and then, turning to Charlie, "I behaved like a cad to you to-day, I beg your pardon," went by him abruptly and left the room.

* * * * *

"Good night, Peggy."

"Good night, Charlie."

"Soon I shall see you, when you go home, every week—sometimes twice in the week. Do you look forward to it as much as I do?"

She closed her eyes.

"Oh, so much!"

"Then, good night again, and—and—give me a kiss too!"

But Peggy, with scarlet cheeks, pushed him from her.

"No, not you."

"Why, a moment ago—Jim——"

"So different—ah so different! He's like my brother, he knows that. People always kiss their brothers, and——"

"Well, I don't want to be your brother." Charlie hesitated a moment, and then threw himself down by her sofa. "Peggy—darling little Peggy, will you—will you be my sweetheart?"

"Oh, Charlie—not really!"

"Yes, really. True to me till you get to be a woman—beyond that—true always. True as that needle in the little compass I gave you which never swerves or alters."

Peggy raised her hand from where it hung by the sofa and pressed her finger on the middle button of her frock, whispering, her head half-buried in the cushion:

"It's under there, Charlie. It's been there ever since."

"My own dear Peggy. Then—then, have you a kiss for me now?"

Jessie Routh.

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Christmas Storyettes.

He wasn't Generous.

Father: "Your schoolmaster can't be such a mean man as you make out. I notice his son has all the Christmas toys he can possibly need." Tommy: "Why, those are what his father takes away from the other boys."

He was Sorry.

Teddy: "I wish I hadn't licked Jimmy Brown this morning." Mother: "You see how wrong it was, don't you, Teddy?" Teddy: "Yes, 'cause I didn't know till the afternoon he was going to have a big Christmas cake."

Lazy Boy!

Little Frank wrote a letter to Santa Claus, in which he asked that genial old soul to remember him with sundry articles which he desired. But he put in a proviso that is worth noting: "Don't put anything in my stocking. It is too much work to take 'em out. Lay 'em on the chairs."

Freddy's Letter.

"Mamma," said Freddy, "I am going to invite Santa Claus to my Christmas party." "Very well," replied mamma. And Freddy sat down and wrote: "Dear Santa Claus,—You presents are desired at my house on Christmas morning.—Your loving little friend, Freddy Fosdick."

Sold.

Jones had been entertaining a few friends at dinner. Ordering coffee to be served in the library, he led the way to that apartment. Taking down a sword that was hanging on the wall and brandishing it with much affectation of martial ardour, he said: "Never, gentlemen, shall I forget the day when I drew this trusty blade for the first time." "And where was that?" asked a curious guest. "Why, in a Christmas raffle."

A Christmas Story Boiled Down.

It was Christmas Eve. Streets—brilliantly lit shop windows—toys—gay crowds—snow on the ground—everybody out—Christmas. Jane Allalone wandered all alone—crowd—sweet, sad face, wistful eyes. Five years before, James Goodygoody—Christmas Eve—betrothed to Jane—sailed away—India—ship lost—never heard of—foundered on coast of Africa. Jane held on to hope and her sewing machine—never would marry—pined away, &c. William Badbody—rich, corrupt, dissipated—mortgage on Jane's mother's house—foreclosure. Away villain! Rather poverty, crusts, &c. Turned out of doors—homeless. Down by the dark river—about to make the fatal plunge—in fact, Jane did plunge. But just then the ship, with Captain James W. Goodygoody, which had not been lost at all, came sailing up to the dock, loaded to the water's edge with china, silk dresses, and tea. Captain Goodygoody saw Jane struggling in the water. He fished her out with a boat-hook and hauled her on board his own good craft. "My Jane!" "My James!" The cook dried her at the galley-stove, and although soaked with salt water, she looked as fresh as a daisy. In fact, Jane was a daisy, and don't you forget it. They were married on Christmas Day.

He wanted to Know.

Bobby: "How are you goin' to keep Christmas Day?" Tommy: "Dunno. Is there any way to keep it so it'll last till next one comes?"

It Depended.

Fond Aunt: "Well, my dear, what shall I get you for Christmas?" Six-year-old Nephew (patronisingly): "It all depends upon how much money you have."

She liked to Know their Cost.

Miss Bright: "What, shopping again! Mercy! but what a lot of presents you must be making this year!" Miss Flight: "I never give presents; am opposed to it on principle. But I do like to go round and price things. It is so gratifying, you know, when you make a visit after Christmas, and are shown the presents that have been received, to know just how much the things cost."

A Feminine Talker.

Small Boy: "Mum wants a loaf of stale bread ter make stuffin' with for our Christmas turkey." Baker: "We have no stale bread left." "No bread?" "Nothing but fresh bread." "Gimme a loaf." "But you said your mother desired stale bread." "Yes." "This isn't stale." "Mum's run acrost th' street to talk with the neighbours 'bout th' goings-on at Mrs. Blinker's last night, an' it'll be stale by the time she gits back."

Under the Mistletoe.

Gertie (who had just been kissed by Arthur under the mistletoe, which he had discovered hanging in the hall): "Oh, Arthur, you wicked wretch! To take advantage of me like that! I wish I knew who hung it there; I'd—I'd pay them out, that's all!" Arthur (to little brother, later on in the evening): "Tommy, I am going to take Gertie away from you soon. Will you mind?" Tommy: "Not in the least, Mr. Popp. Sis and I are not friends now." Arthur: "How's that?" Tommy (heedless of Gertie's killing glances): "Oh, she boxed my ears for tipping her off the chair when she was nailing up that mistletoe in the hall!"

A Christmas Terror.

The stout man with a large package beneath his arm hurried through the crowded thoroughfare, closely pursued by a small man of haggard aspect, with a thick stick in his hand. On and on, relentless as the ticking of a clock, the forlorn man dogged the other, and those who passed him heard an occasional word drop from his lips, indicative of despair, of awful terror. Finally some of the crowd turned and followed the pair, determined not to miss the fun. The crowd grew larger, and finally a bold man went up to the person of haggard countenance. "What's the matter?" he asked. The little man turned. "Matter?" he echoed. "See that man with a bundle? He is my next-door neighbour, and in that bundle he has a cornet which he has bought for his small son at Christmas." But the crowd waited no longer. It surged ahead with relentless fury and left him to work out his own vengeance, and when peace had been restored the remains of a battered man and a battered cornet lay upon the pavement.

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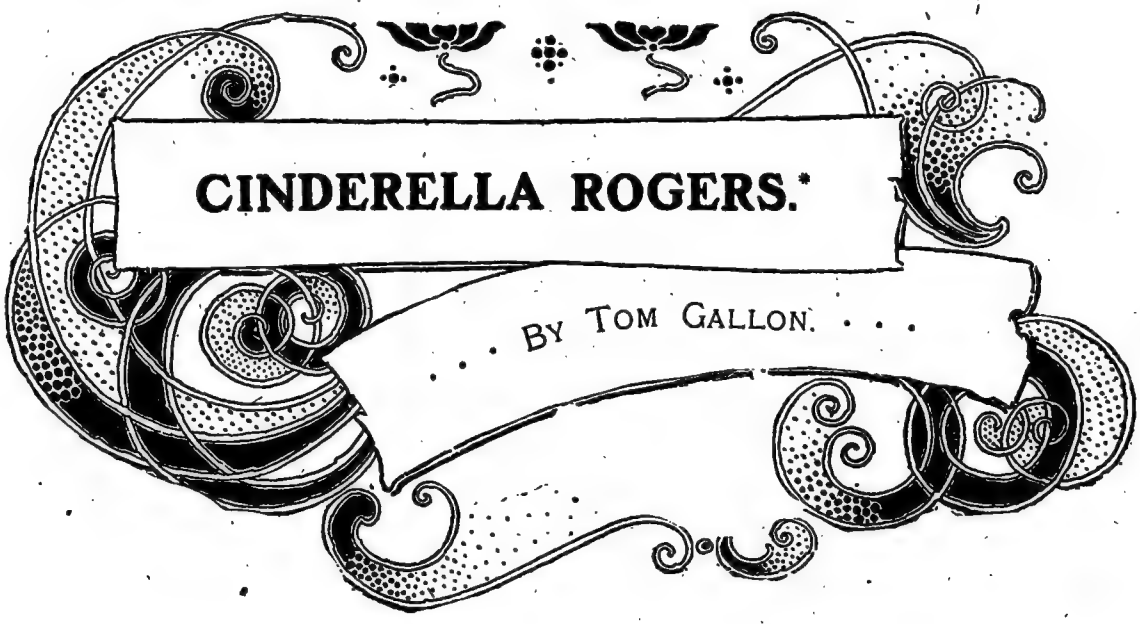
COMPLETE SHORT NOVEL.



CINDERELLA ROGERS.*

. . . By Tom Gallon. . . .

"Hobson!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Bring me the morning paper—any one will do."

The trim, stolid man-servant slipped out of the room, and returned almost immediately with a carefully folded newspaper, which he held out to his master, and then drew back near the door and stood passively waiting. The master, seated in a deep chair near the fire, impatiently turned the leaves, and began at last frowningly to scan the advertisement columns. The servant coughed, and glanced at the plain silver watch he drew from his pocket.

"It's nigh on to seven o'clock, sir," he ventured at last.

"I know."

"And you dine with——"

"Yes—yes; don't worry. I'm not going. I'm not going anywhere."

"Very good, sir."

Martin Chaloner got up and stood before the fire, still with his eyes fixed upon the paper. A tall, brown-faced man, quite young, with kindly, grey eyes, and certain humorous lines about his mouth; a man who bore the look of having seen much, of having been, indeed, an unobtrusive and somewhat amused spectator in the big playhouse of the world, where so many men and so many women strive together, and fret out their little lives upon the same stage.

"Look well at me, Hobson," he said at last, without removing his gaze from the paper.

"Yes, sir."

"You've known me for a good many years, I think; saw you ever a being so unfortunate?" He spoke in the same quiet, matter-of-fact tone, half-absently and without looking at the man.

The servant coughed again, and smiled a little behind his hand.

"Well, sir," he ventured deferentially. "I would scarcely 'ave been so bold as to put it quite that way. A gent as 'as, in a manner o' speaking, all as the 'eart could desire——"

"Oh, you think that, do you? You think that the power to write a cheque for any sum I may require, chambers in a fashionable quarter of town, a host of acquaintances, and a pretty wide experience of life, mean all that the heart could desire, eh?" He glanced over the top of the paper keenly at the man for a moment and then glanced down again. "You're no philosopher, Hobson."

"No, sir," replied the man humbly.

"Frankly, Hobson, I'm tired of it all—tired of all the dull round of things, the certain knowledge of what is to happen day by day, and the people I am to meet, and the clothes I am to wear. For want of a better expression, I might say that I am in search of a new sensation. You don't understand that, I suppose, Hobson?"

"Can't say as I do, sir," replied the man, looking at his master with his head on one side. "I've found, sir, as a man gets on best by takin' wot Providence sends him day by day and sleepin' sound o' nights. New sensations is apt to upset a man, sir, in a manner o' speakin'."

Martin Chaloner laughed softly, and the lines about his mouth deepened. "Well, I dare say you're right, Hobson," he said, "from your point of view. You've

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been a good faithful fellow ever since you joined me first, years ago, and I—hallo! what's this?" He was reading one of the advertisements with a little more eagerness than he had hitherto displayed.

"Nothing the matter, sir, I 'ope?"

"Oh, no; nothing's the matter." He hesitated a moment, and then glanced up at the man. "Just go and pack a bag for me with things enough for—let us say—a week. I can send to you for some more if I want them. Hurry up!"

"Goin' away, sir?"

"Yes; I'll give you the address presently. Look sharp with those things."

Left to himself, Martin Chaloner read the advertisement which had attracted his attention over again softly.

> A LADY, from pecuniary considerations, is anxious to receive a gentleman as paying Guest in her home. Refined and cheerful society. Select neighbourhood. Address, etc.

"Sounds dull enough," he muttered. "It's perfectly idiotic on my part, even to contemplate such a thing; but it'll be a change, and somehow"—he looked at the paper frowningly—"there's something that seems curiously to attract me about it. There are dozens of advertisements of the same type, and yet I find myself turning again and again to this one. What does it mean? I am not a superstitious man, but——"

He sat with puckered brows, pondering over it for a long time, and at last got up, and flung the paper from him, and began to stride up and down the room.

"What a fool I am!" he ejaculated, with something that was almost a sigh. "After all, Hobson was right; I'm supposed to have everything that the heart could wish for, as he tersely expresses it; and yet I am contemplating going into a lodging-house—for that's what it means I suppose—on the chance of some adventure turning up. As if any adventures ever came to a man in that way, save in books. Here we are, within a fortnight of Christmas; and I've got the pick of half-a-dozen places where a lonely man may be happy, and I don't want one of them. What's the matter with me? Am I, despite all my philosophy, beginning to cry out on the hollowness of things; beginning to feel there's something deeper under life than anything I have found? Oh, Martin Chaloner, Martin Chaloner!" he put his head for a moment between his hands and sighed, "your old cynic of a father left you his fortune, and some of his beliefs in the emptiness of all things; your gentle mother left you her heart. And the two make a bad mixture, my boy."

Still uneasy and undecided, he picked up the paper again, and sought out the advertisement, and re-read it. "After all, it might prove to be rather good fun; to drop into the midst of people who know nothing of me—to disappear, as I have disappeared before, and yet to be within a cab drive of everything. That's better than bolting across seas, and more out of the common. Well, it doesn't matter much either way; I'll toss for it."

He spun a coin in the air, whispering to himself, as he covered it with his hand: "Heads I'm a paying guest; tails I go to Lady Bertha's."

It was heads. He put the coin in his pocket, laughed softly, and rang the bell.

"My bag ready, Hobson?" he asked as the man appeared.

"Quite ready, sir."

Martin Chaloner cut the advertisement from the paper, sat down at his desk, wrote the address, and then handed it to the man.

"This in case of emergency," he said. "I might return to-morrow; I might not be back for a month. If anyone comes you might say that I've gone away, and you haven't the least notion where I am. Keep all letters until my return. If anything very important happens, wire to me. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, sir." The man hesitated and coughed nervously. "Perhaps I might make bold to say, sir, that I 'opes, if you ain't back before, that you'll 'ave a merry Christmas, sir."

Martin Chaloner laughed. "Do you think I am going away to be merry?" he asked. "I am going to see how other people contrive to be merry, if it's possible. Merry, indeed! Call me a hansom."

The address given in the advertisement was in a quiet street in the neighbourhood of Regent's Park. The house he discovered to be a large, old-fashioned one, somewhat dingy-looking, and with an unmistakable air of faded and down-at-heel gentility about it. He dismissed the cab, and stood for a few moments on the steps of the house, with his bag beside him, looking up and down the empty street. "Well, this is a mad proceeding," he muttered to himself; "if it weren't that Hobson would think I was more off my head than usual, I'd go back again, and dine comfortably, and go to Lady Bertha's for Christmas. No, hang it! I'm sick to death of Lady Bertha and all the lot of them, and I may get some fun out of this."

He rang the bell somewhat viciously, feeling half inclined to run away the moment he had done so. But the thing had to be gone through with now, and he stood his ground. A decidedly untidy servant opened the door, and he mentioned the advertisement; she backed against the wall, and motioned to him to enter He went in, absolutely determined in his own mind to be out of the place within the next five minutes, and speeding back to his own comfortable quarters. For the house was stuffy, and close and sombre, and the room in which he was left was filled with hideous atrocities in the shape of furniture and decorations which filled his soul with depression. But the door opened, and in an instant all his resolutions of flight were gone, and even the depressing, sombre room seemed to take on a new aspect. A young girl had entered, and softly closed the door behind her, and stood nervously watching him, as if waiting for him to speak.

She was small and slight, with an oval, delicate face, and big wistful brown eyes. She was dressed very neatly, in black—a dress which had obviously been worn a long time. Despite her quiet attitude and the gravity of her face, she was so entirely different to anything about her, and seemed so little more than a child, that Martin Chaloner felt the ridiculous nature of his quest and of the situation generally more keenly than ever, and faltered, and hesitated to speak.

"You called in answer to the advertisement, I think?" she said at last; and her voice was just the voice he would have expected to issue from those lips.

"Yes; I only saw the advertisement to-night," he began, lamely. "Are you—are you——" He stopped in confusion, not knowing how to complete the question.

"Mrs. Trigg asked me to see you," she replied quickly. "She is—is not very well." Martin had a vision of the lady of the house hurriedly preparing to receive a

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visitor, and smiled and nodded. "Perhaps you would like to see the rooms," she added nervously.

"Oh, I daresay they're all right," he replied carelessly; "but I suppose I'd better see them, though I'm giving you a frightful lot of trouble, I'm afraid," he added.

She flushed quickly, and looked at him with something of surprise. "Oh! there's no question of trouble," she replied quietly. "It's a part of my duties."

The rooms proved to be fairly comfortable, although it is probable that Martin Chaloner did not very carefully examine them; the terms he agreed to at once. That night, as he sat in front of a very smoky fire, in an easy chair which belied its name, and which had one castor off, he smilingly communed with himself.

"Well, I've seen Mrs. Triggs—tall, bony, severe, pious, with a quick eye to the main chance; I've seen Master Triggs, of some twenty summers, who lives on his mother, and wears loud clothes, and smokes abominable cigars; I've observed Miss Triggs, who has a general air of curl papers in the morning, and holes in her stockings. I suppose Mr. Triggs has passed into the shades. Happy man! But what—in the name of all that's wonderful—is that girl doing here? She can't be one of the family; perhaps she's a poor relation. But that's not possible, either; I'll swear she hasn't a drop of their blood in her veins. And yet I suppose she *must* be a poor relation, or they wouldn't snub her so dreadfully. I must try and find out."

He lay awake that night a long time thinking about her, and fell asleep at last, to dream of her. He was awakened late next morning by a soft tapping at his door. At first he did not remember where he was; but it dawned upon him quickly, and he cried out from the shelter of the bedclothes to know what was the matter.

"Would you like your breakfast brought up to you?" was the question he heard from the other side of the door; and the voice he recognised as that of the girl who had filled so large a part of his thoughts during the past few hours. He hurriedly sat up in bed, and called out that he would, if it would not give her any additional trouble. Then, as he heard her light feet moving away from the door, he scrambled out of bed, and began to dress hurriedly.

He was just passing out into his sitting-room as the girl entered it by another door, bearing a heavy tray, on which his breakfast was set out. He went forward quickly to take the tray from her; for a moment they looked at each other across it.

"Where's the servant?" he asked.

"This is part of my duty, Mr. Chaloner," she said quietly.

"Well, I shouldn't have had it brought up if I'd known that. Come, let me have it." There was a curious, tenderly masterful way about him, and his smile was so genial and good-humoured, that the girl relinquished the tray, and stood looking at him, and smiling perplexedly as he set it on the table and began to arrange his breakfast for himself.

"You know," he said as he set out the various things—"I've been in the habit of waiting upon myself all my life—that is to say, when I've been travelling especially; and I hate to sit still and see a woman wait on me. It isn't the right sort of thing at all, you know. There—now we're quite straight," He looked round at the girl and laughed. "Thank you very much—by-the-way—I think they call you—what was it?"

"My name is Rogers," replied the girl.

"Ah, of course; please forgive me, Miss Rogers." He hesitated a moment, and then went on more hurriedly with a sudden heightening of colour. "I should like to ask you a very plain question; if you think I'm infernally rude, don't answer it. But what are you doing here?"

She looked at him in some astonishment, and not a little distress. "Indeed, I am afraid I don't understand you," she said.

"No—I'm afraid it's horribly rude of me; but I am a little puzzled about you. You see, I only came here last night, and you—you are so different from these other people. You're not—not one of the family, I suppose?"

The question was so good-natured, and his grey eyes wore so friendly an expression that she laughed, and answered at once:

"No, I'm not one of the family."

"Ah! I'm rather glad of that."

"I am what is known as a lady-help," went on the girl, in a lower tone. "Which means, I am afraid, that I have to work harder than most servants, and am not paid quite so well; but I'm allowed to take my meals with the family."

"Well, that's a privilege, at any rate," said Martin Chaloner; "but why do you do it, Miss Rogers?"

"I have my living to earn, Mr. Chaloner," she replied quietly; and that ended the conversation.

In the days that followed he became more deeply interested than ever. If ever love was born in a man's heart from small beginnings and under commonplace circumstances, it was certainly born in the heart of Martin Chaloner then. His own life had glided on so smoothly and so easily that he had never known, save from a glimpse from the outside now and then, that it had a rough and seamy side to it. And now he came face to face with a frail and delicate slip of womanhood, struggling hard and bravely for mere bread under sordid conditions, the thought of his own lazy strength in comparison put him to shame. He began to believe at last that some curious fate had brought him to the house, and put his purposeless life within the sphere of the girl's influence.

He came suddenly upon her one night, while she was strolling aimlessly, deep in conversation with an elderly man. It was a dark and cold night, with a bitter east wind sweeping the streets, and but few people were about. The two were so deep in conversation that they did not observe him; watching from a little distance he saw the girl's hands clasped upon the man's arm, and saw the man presently turn his head, and stoop and kiss her very tenderly on the lips. Martin Chaloner's feeling that this was some sacred, hidden chapter in the girl's life overcame the strong feeling of curiosity he possessed, and he turned away, wondering what this new mystery might be.

The sound of quick, heavy steps behind him roused him, and he turned swiftly, and ran full tilt against the man he had just seen with the girl. She had disappeared, and the man had been hurrying away without looking where he went. The shock was sufficient to send the stranger's old felt hat from his head; Martin saw, as he uttered a word of apology, that the man was roughly dressed, and had a shrewd, kindly face, and wisps of grey hair pushed back from the lined forehead.

Martin stooped and picked up the hat, and handed it to its owner

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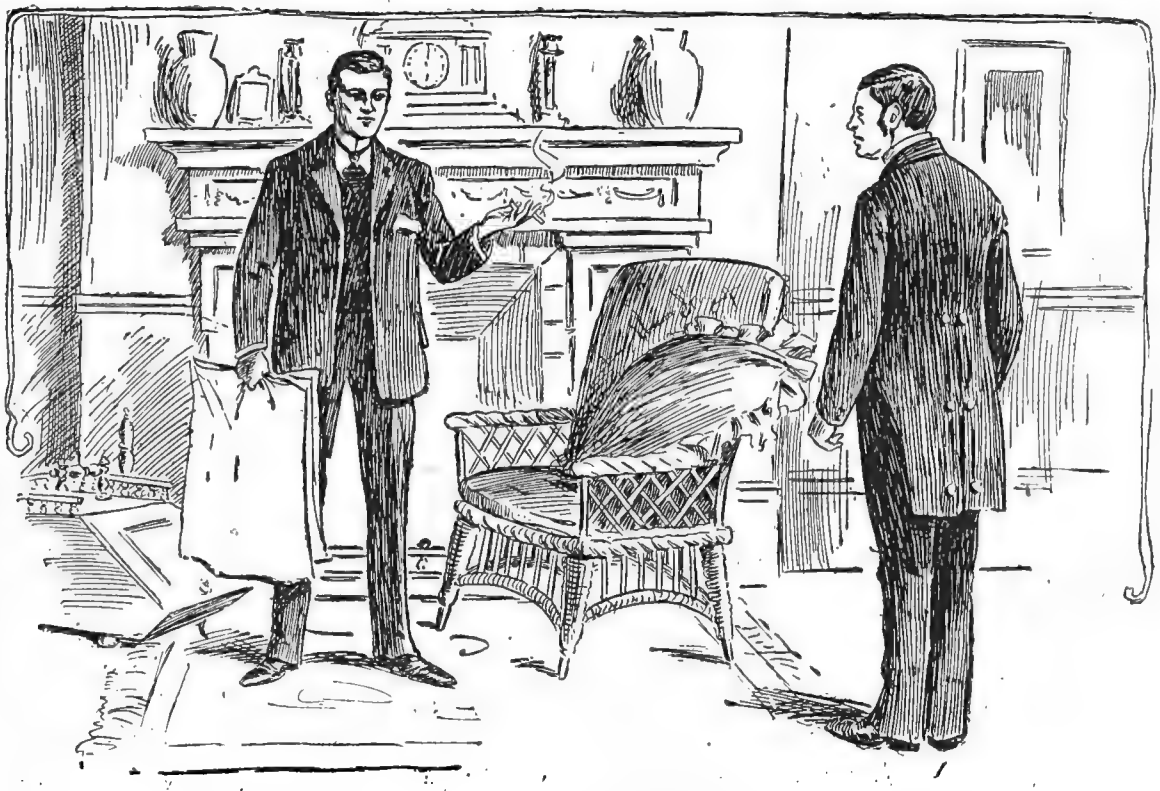

"My bag ready, Hobson?" he asked, as the man appeared.

"No offence, no offence, young man," said the other, in a hoarse, cheerful voice. "Thank ye kindly, sir, old Job Rogers ain't the man to take no offence, where none ain't meant. Good night to ye, sir."

Martin Chaloner stood staring after the man as he disappeared up the street. Truly he had not expected to get such an inkling of the hidden chapter of the girl's life as this. Job Rogers! The name was the same as her own; then this man must be a relative—perhaps even her father. But he thought of the girl's gentle and refined voice and manner, and dismissed that idea as absurd.

Meanwhile, with no definite object in view, he lingered on at the house in Regent's Park, with the feeling growing within him more strongly day by day, that he could not leave it and leave her behind to the drudgery of her life. He thought, half-laughingly sometimes, of the change which seemed to have come into his affairs; wondered what some of his aristocratic friends would think if they could know the story.

"Lady Bertha—fairest of widows—you used to be rather fond of me; I wonder what you'd think if you knew that I was spending my days in a lodging-house in London, and my nights in dreams of a lady-help!"

Matters came to a crisis one morning, when Martin Chaloner had risen somewhat earlier than usual, and had gone downstairs to breakfast with the rest. There were other lodgers in the house—called by courtesy "guests"—and, probably from the fact that he had little or nothing to do with them, they eyed him with no particular favour. Moreover, his appearances at the general table were rare, and he was somewhat of a mystery to those in the house.

It happened, on this particular morning, that Mr. Jack Triggs, of whom mention has been made, was in a decidedly bad humour, even for him; Martin noticed that Miss Rogers, who sat in a humble position near the foot of the table, looked somewhat paler and more nervous than usual. As he sat down, with a bow towards the girl, young Triggs scowled at him, and looked across at her.

"Now, then, Rogers, pass the cream, will you?" said that young gentleman loudly. "Why don't you attend to people?"

The girl flushed hotly and hesitated for a moment, and then stretched out her hand towards the cream-jug.

Triggs' strident voice broke in again:

"Oh, you needn't give yourself airs; you're only a servant, you know."

Martin Chaloner got up quickly, and had his hand upon the cream-jug before the girl could touch it.

"Allow me," he said quietly. He walked round to where the youth was sitting, and, before anyone was aware of his intention, had emptied the contents of the jug over that gentleman's well-brushed hair. He

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set the jug down, and, as Jack Triggs rose up spluttering from the table, faced him resolutely.

"Cream, I think you said," said Martin in a low voice, and looking steadily at the other. "Would you like any more?"

Mrs. Triggs screamed. Mr. Jack Triggs, forgetful alike of his personal safety and his behaviour spluttered out a string of oaths. Martin Chaloner darted out a hand, and caught him swiftly by the collar, and had him out of the room, and into the hall, and was kicking him with much vigour before anyone had fully recovered from their astonishment. Finally, with a last dexterous thrust, he sent him down the short flight of stairs leading to the kitchen, and walked quietly up to his own room.

He did not see the girl until much later in the day, when some little duty compelled her to present herself in his sitting-room. He saw that her eyes were red, as if with weeping; her voice was very low and frightened when she spoke to him. With only the hope to reassure her he sprung up and faced her, and spoke as kindly as possible.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," he said, "that you should have been annoyed by that young blackguard this morning. I really couldn't let it pass, you know. I only hope they won't visit it on you."

"I am very grateful to you, Mr. Chaloner," she said, without looking up at him. "I'm afraid, though, that they will visit it on me, as you say."

Martin Chaloner cleared his throat and came a little nearer to her.

"Look here," he said, "I hate this place, except for you, and I hate to think of your going on working here all your days for such people as these. Won't you let me help you? Won't you let me do something to——"

"Thank you, Mr. Chaloner," she said hurriedly, "but it is quite unnecessary. I am used to the work, and to the people, and such little things as that which happened this morning do not matter; they do not really hurt so much as you would think. Indeed, I shall be all right."

He suddenly put his hands on her slight shoulders, and looked down at her with such a tender smile, that when she raised her eyes quickly to his, the tears flooded them.

"Do you know, little woman," he said, "that I can't bear to think of you having to work for anyone; it doesn't seem right or fitting. Don't be afraid to look at me; I am not such an awful fellow, after all. If I ask you to do something very great and very difficult for me—will you do it?"

"I will do anything that is in my power for you," she replied gratefully.

"This is quite in your power," he said. "Now, don't jump or run away from me, because there's nothing to be frightened at. Won't you leave all this life behind, and let me take care of you? Oh, don't cover your face! I've grown very fond of you; I love you better than any woman I've ever met. And I'm a poor lonely chap, who wants someone to look after him. Won't you at least think about it?"

She tried to escape from his detaining hands, and shook her head. "No—no," she whispered; "you don't understand what you are asking. You don't know anything about me, or about my life. You found me here—a hard-working little drudge—and you're a little sorry for me, and so you say this. I shall never forget how kind you have been to me; no man ever spoke to me before as you have done. But you mustn't think of this again."

"It isn't my pity or my sorrow for you," he said, "although, Heaven knows, I am as orry as anyone can be. But I love you better than I love anyone on earth."

She turned away resolutely, and held her hand on the handle of the door.

"Indeed, I beg that you will forget that you ever said this to me—that you have ever carried such a thought of me in your mind. There are women in this world whose lot it is to tread one quiet path, and to tread it contentedly to the end; for them are born no tragedies, and love gently passes them by. I am one of them."

"Then you don't believe what I say?" he asked.

"Yes—I believe every word of it," she replied, looking at him steadily. "And I shall remember, with pride and gratitude, all my life, that a good man loved me." She opened the door, and was gone before he could speak.

The next day he missed her; his breakfast was brought up by the untidy servant. On making anxious inquiry of that damsel, she informed him that Miss Rogers had left the house early that morning, and was "never comin' back no more."

"What a brute I am!" he thought as he sat before his untasted breakfast. "I've driven her away; that's what it is. I've persecuted her with my odious attentions, and she's gone away to escape from me. Well, there's one consolation about it, at all events; I'll turn my back on Mrs. Triggs."

He packed his bag and settled with Mrs. Triggs—quieting that lady's volubility in regard to necessary notice by paying her whatever she demanded—and quitted the house. His stolid man-servant received him as though he had just returned from a walk, and he found that nothing of any importance had occurred in his absence.

"You were right, Hobson," he said that night as he sat before the fire, and the servant was setting coffee and cigars at his elbow—"you were perfectly right. New sensations don't do. A man had better be content with what Providence sends him, and not go crying for the moon. Oh, yes, Hobson, you were perfectly right."

Nevertheless, the next day he felt more restless than ever. Whatever he did, wherever he went, the face of the girl seemed to rise before him hauntingly. He pictured her among coarse and common people doing sordid work, and rewarded by sneers and snubs; he thought of her eyes as he had seen them raised to his filled with tears. To Hobson's complete astonishment, he made up his mind on the second day after his return to go away; and started off at an hour's notice, and without any hint as to his destination.

"Sumthink is up with the master," muttered Hobson dejectedly; "I've never seen 'im like this 'ere afore. There can't be a lady in the case; the master's too cautious; but sumthink's up; 'e don't seem to be able to settle down to anythink."

Fortune took Martin Chaloner on this occasion into the country at no very great distance from London. He had determined as a matter of fact upon going much farther; but the train happened to stop at an old-fashioned out-of-the-way station on a hill, with a pretty village nestling in the winter sunlight below it, and in his usual erratic fashion, he made up his mind in a moment that he liked the appearance of the place,

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They drew nearer together over the fire.

flung his bag on to the platform, and jumped out himself. He discovered on inquiry that there was an inn in the place, and set off to find it.

It proved to be an old rambling place, with low ceilings, and heavy beams and sanded floors; with great open fire-places and comfortable roomy beds; one seemed to hear a shadowy blast from the old coach horns that had echoed in its courtyard in bygone days.

"This isn't so bad a place," said Martin Chaloner as he settled down after a plain dinner before the big fire in the coffee-room. "By Jove! I'll spend Christmas here, in solitary grandeur."

Sitting there in the comfortable warmth he gradually fell into a light slumber; when he awoke he was startled to see the figure of a man sitting opposite to him, and spreading out his hands to the fire. Only half-awake at first Martin Chaloner looked at the man from under his half-closed lids for some seconds, while the man looked steadily at the fire; then Martin leant forward and rubbed his eyes, and planted his hands on his knees and stared at the other, trying dimly to remember where and under what circumstances he had met him before. The man's hat was off, and was lying on the settle beside him; he was an elderly man with grey hair, and a clean-shaven, deeply-lined face. Seeing Martin looking at him, he turned about and smiled, and, making a half-clumsy bow, said:

"Which I feels as you'll excuse me a intrudin' on you, sir, but it bein' a bitter night, and a fire the thing that attracts a man in a way, I thought as I'd look in an' 'ave a glass in comfort like afore turnin' in. I arsks yer pardon, sir, for intrudin'; no offence, sir, I 'ope."

Recollection came upon Martin Chaloner in a flash; he remembered, in an instant, that this was the man he had seen talking to the girl in the dark street—the man with whom he had come into such violent collision, and who had given his name unasked as Job Rogers. Quite eagerly, he seemed to see in this again the finger of Fate, and set himself to work cautiously to question the old fellow. His suggestion of another glass was accepted, after some modest hesitation, by the other, and they drew nearer together over the fire.

"Yer see, sir," began the old man confidentially, "mine's a sort of rovin' life, so to speak—'ere to-day, and t'other place to-morrow, as the Scriptures 'ave it. The show business is my line—comes as near to the legitimate, in a way, as don't make no odds in the reckonin'—only *we* does it in pennies and tuppences, an' *they* does it in 'alf-guineas, an' 'alf-crowns. 'Ere we are, sir—that's me—that's old Job Rogers!"

He pulled out from a capacious side-pocket a showy yellow handbill, and spread it out with a look of pride.

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"There we are, sir—*the* Great Richardson Show, as performed before Royalty—together with Varieties. The Varieties comes a bit expensive, and don't always pay as well as they might—but they gives tone to the Show—an' it's tone wot we wants."

Martin Chaloner began to get interested. "There ain't a fair in the country but wot I knows the date of it, an' the best pitch when you gits there. It's rough, an' it's 'ard sometimes, sir; but I wouldn't change with the Queen o' Hengland in 'er palace—God bless 'er. An' then, yer see"—he stared at the fire meditatively—"there's compensations."

"Compensations; I'm afraid I don't quite understand you."

The old man glanced round him cautiously for a moment, and then bent nearer to the other.

"Supposin' you was in my place, guv'nor, an' you knew that when you was a-footin' it through the bitter cold, an' the sleet, an' the mud, an' the rain—or a-trampin' arter the carawan on a boisterin' hot day, with the sun a-boilin' the marrer out o' ye bones, so to speak; suppose you could think, while people was a-lookin' upon yer as a wagabond, an' a nobody—suppose you could think as you 'ad someone, far away in London, among the swells, a-'oldin' 'er own, an' a-treadin' it with the best of them, an' a-showin' 'er pretty face for all the world to look at, an' with never a thing to soil 'er pretty fingers, an' never nothink to do the livelong day but play the pianner, and do them delicate sorts of fancy work wot ladies does when the time 'angs 'eavy? Suppose you 'ad someone like that as was a lady, an' could 'old up 'er 'ead with the best of them, wouldn't that amount to compensation?"

"I suppose it would," said Martin, slowly. "Is there someone like that?"

"Is there? I should just think there was! Years ago, when 'er poor mother died, I swore to myself as she shouldn't never 'ave the 'ardships, an' the worry, an' all the rest of it that I'd 'ad. Yer see, sir, I'm old and tough, an' I likes the life, an' I shouldn't feel comfortable-like, if I woke up in the mornin', an' didn't 'ear the 'osses movin', an' didn't know as I was in the old van. But with a woman it's different; an' there she is—Lord love yer, sir—a lady to 'er finger-tips—an' 'er ole father is proud to git a glimpse of 'er sometimes, an' to know as she's well an' 'appy. It costs a bit, I don't mind sayin'; but I don't grudge a penny of it, an' I sends it to 'er reg'lar."

He got up, and emptied his glass and put on his hat. Martin Chaloner rose also, and held out his hand; the other glanced at his face for a moment, and then grasped the hand.

"Do you stay here long?" asked Martin. "Because, if you do—you might come in and see me again."

"Thank ye, sir; I take it as werry kind. I shall be 'ere for a matter of a day or two longer. I'm pitched down at the end o' the village. Good-night, sir."

Martin waited until the old man's footsteps had died away down the long echoing corridor, and then cautiously opened the door and followed him. He heard him pass out of the front door of the inn, and heard his firm quick tread upon the frosted road outside. He threw his big coat round him, put on his hat, and followed.

"I don't know why I should dog the old boy like this," he thought, "but there's some mystery here I can't understand, and perhaps I shall find out what's become of that sweet-faced girl. I can't rest till I find her; she seems to be carrying about with her, in her little hands, wherever she is, all the best part of me—all that's worth anything. Where is she? The old man thinks she is still in London, for there can be no doubt that he spoke of her to-night. He believes her rich and happy, and I found her slaving away to earn her own living. What does it all mean?"

The night was bright but moonless; only a few stars twinkled far overhead. Martin saw the upright sturdy figure of the old man going before him down the road, and cautiously followed, keeping well in the shadow of the cottages he passed. At the end of the village was a piece of waste common land, on which were set a couple of caravans of the ordinary gipsy type, and another covered van. Some horses were tethered near by, and he heard the bark of a dog as he drew nearer.

The old man had almost reached the first caravan, in the tiny window of which a light glowed, when a figure slipped out from behind it, and came forward swiftly to meet him. Martin Chaloner drew back in the shadow of a tree, and saw the old man stop with a little cry of surprise, and then go quickly forward and take the figure in his arms, and bend and kiss the face. It was the figure of a woman.

They drew away from the caravan, and walked slowly together towards where Martin was hidden. As the girl drew away from the man, and looked up into his face in the starlight, Martin saw the face he had fully expected to see—that of the girl he had met in the lodging-house in Regent's Park. It was quite impossible for him to move without being discovered; he stood quite still, and was forced to listen.

"Daddy," the girl was saying, "you mustn't send me away from you any more; it has all been a mistake. You only did it because you loved me—because you thought that you would make me a lady, and something better than you were yourself. Dear—there is nothing, and no one better than you on earth; and I have come back to you, because I am very, very tired, and because I need you. I remember, when I was a tiny child, how I played about on the grass, among the wheels and the horses, and what a joyous life it was; we've been deceiving ourselves, you and I, Daddy, and we've got to begin again. Daddy, you won't send me back again?"

"My dear, my dear!" exclaimed the old fellow tenderly, patting her head, "you'll break my heart. What have I been working for all these days but to make you a lady; to 'elp you, an' see that you were warm an' comfortable, and that nothink couldn't ever come nigh you, to fret or trouble you. The ole show was good enough for me, dear, but it wasn't good enough for you. Come, what 'as troubled you?"

She hid her head upon his breast and sobbed out her poor little story, of how a man—a gentleman—had been good and kind to her, and had told her that he loved her; of how she had loved him with all her passionate heart in return, and yet had had to leave him, and hide herself from him.

"It's no good, Daddy. All the money in the world, and all the pretending in the world, won't ever make me good enough or fine enough to be his wife, or to take my place by his side. I love him—oh! I can't tell you how much. If I didn't love him quite so well I might have tried to forget all the rest, and have listened to him. But I couldn't do that. Let me stay with you, for a little while, at

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least; let me think that I am a child again, and that I never tried to pretend I was a lady."

Martin Chaloner had made up his mind that he would slip away quietly, and hear no more; but the fear of again losing sight of the girl, especially after the words he had heard from her lips, was stronger than anything else; he stepped suddenly forward from his hiding-place, and confronted them.

The girl, with a cry, clung to her father; the old man drew his arm about her, and faced the other man angrily.

"You must listen to me for a moment, Mr. Rogers," said Martin, huskily, and at the sound of his voice the girl trembled and hid her face. "When I met you to-night I had no thought that your daughter was so near at hand; I had met her in London, and had learnt to love her. I am the man of whom she speaks, and, even though she should turn from me again to-night, I shall carry the blessed memory of her words with me to my grave. I feared that I should never look upon her face again; but Fate plays such strange tricks with us, and Fate sent me here to you, and brought us again together. I am a poor, idle, wandering dog, who hasn't even the merit that you possess of earning his bread by hard work; mine was all earned for me long before I was born. But your daughter, in spite of all she says, is the sweetest lady under Heaven, and I love her; I tell her so now, in the presence of her father. And I'll never give her up"—he laughed in his old, good-humoured fashion—"if I have to take to the caravan business myself."

The old man had by this time recovered from his astonishment. He nodded his head sympathetically.

"Spoken like a man, sir," he exclaimed, "and spoken like a gentleman."

"Daddy, you won't understand," began the girl, in a low voice.

"Forgive me, it's *you* won't understand," broke in Martin. "But I won't trouble you to-night; you're tired and upset. Mr. Rogers"—he turned, in his easy, natural fashion, to the old man—"what are we going to do with this young lady to-night? Will you let me take her back to the inn, and ask the landlady to find a room for her?"

"Thank ye kindly, sir; that's the very thing. Now run along, my dear, an' we'll talk about it in the morning. But Lord love ye, sir"—he turned towards Martin—"I'd like to see yer in the show line."

"Don't you make any mistake, old friend; I'd make a first-rate man at the business. Come along, Miss Rogers."

The man and the girl walked for some little distance down the road without speaking.

Martin was the first to break the silence.

"I met your father by accident to-night," he said, "and he told me the whole story of his darling in London, and all that he had done for her; how he had sent her money, and how she lived as a lady, with never a day's work to do."

She hesitated for a moment, and then turned to him, and put her hands on his arm.

"Oh, won't you understand? I thought of him, working hard in all weathers for me, and I could not bear to use the money that he sent me. It's all saved up—every penny of it; and some day I'll give it back to him, and tell him all about it. When he came to see me, he would never come to the house, for fear of shaming me; I used to meet him—God forgive me—in the streets, and he believed that the big house from which I came was my home; that I lived there as an honoured guest, instead of as a servant. And that is why—because it has all been such a blunder—that I want you to forget the words I said to-night, and which you never should have overheard."

He put his hands on her shoulders, as he had done once before, and looked down into her face in the starlight.

"Are you quite sure you want me to go and forget it?" he said.

She looked at him steadily for a moment, and then suddenly crept nearer to him, and bent her face down, and kissed his hands.

"Oh; my love—my dear love!" she whispered.

He took her in his arms, and put his face down, and whispered in reply:

"Do you think I would let you go now? Do you think I would give you up? You must never ask me that again, dear."

Presently she looked up at him, with a smile flitting across her face. "You don't even know my name," she said softly.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It was a name my father loved; he never thought how foolish it might sound in other ears. My name is Cinderella."

"Oh, wise father!" said Martin, laughing and kissing her. "It's the sweetest name in all the world."

They breakfasted joyously together, the two of them, the next morning in the coffee-room of the inn, and afterwards set out to find her father. All the village seemed astir, and people were coming and going in their best clothes; and the bells of the little church up on the hill were ringing out madly.

"Do you know what to-day is?" she asked, looking up into his face.

He looked down at her and pondered a moment, and then suddenly burst out laughing.

"Why—it's Christmas Day!" he exclaimed. "I've set out twice to try and spend Christmas in a new fashion; I didn't know I should spend it in such sweet company."

It was still quite early, and they went on to the end of the village, and through the trees, and so to the common. But when they got there they stopped, and stared at each other in dismay; the caravans were gone!

Without a word to each other, they went forward quickly, and came at last to the place where they stood in the darkness the night before. Martin's quick eye detected a scrap of paper, pinned to the trunk of the tree which had hidden him. He went forward, and took it down. "It's addressed to you," he said, and held it out to her. They stood side by side, and read it together.

"My deer,—This cums to ope as you will have a mery Chrissmas. You need not wurry about your ole dad. All my dreme has cum true, deer, an the ole show will karry me as long as i need eny karrying. He is a gentleman; no one can look in his eye without knowin that. I am better movin. The old van cums nateral to me, and I carnt change now. Youll find this when I'm gorn, an the Lord knows I karry the lightest hart of eny man this Chrissmas morninge. Send yore old dad a bit of the weding cake, and he'll lay it alongside ov your mother's. Good-bye; you are a lady, arter all.—Job Rogers."

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The Adventures of an Actress.

XX.—THE ASSASSIN'S HAND.

By DONOVAN MART.

CHAPTER I.

On the outskirts of the pleasant city of Norwich dwelt an old couple, John and Martha Lovelace by name. For nearly fifty years they had lived in their little cottage, the home that they loved, humble though it was, the scene, moreover of the one great sorrow of their life.

It had happened twenty years ago, when John was a hale and hearty man, and there were no streaks of white in Martha's hair. The Lovelace family were then four in number, for the old couple had been blessed with two children, a boy and a girl.

Dick Lovelace had always been a wild sort of lad, always fond of playing truant at school, of roaming the countryside like an untamed colt, birds'-nesting, and, it must be confessed, poaching, when he ought to have been more profitably employed over his books. And then he had run away for good, one dark night twenty years ago, leaving an almost illegible, badly-spelt note to say that he could bear the hum-drum country life no longer, but had run off to sea.

As is so often the case with such scapegraces, Dick had been the apple of his mother's eye. She was always ready to find some excuse for his wild pranks, and more than once interposed between father and son, when John had proposed the whip as an antidote to some escapade, more flagrantly outrageous than another.

Since that day nothing had been heard of the runaway. John Lovelace had long ago given up any idea of ever hearing of the boy again. Not so Martha. In her heart of hearts she always carried the belief that some day they would have news of the prodigal.

And the daughter? What had become of her? The same spirit of restlessness that seemed to have infected Dick, had invaded her young life. True, she had not stolen away like a thief in the night, yet she, too, had shaken the dust of the parental cottage off her feet, had gone to London, and had, by dint of the utmost exertion, won a place for herself upon the stage. As Jenny Lovelace she had made her name familiar to many a provincial stage, and now the trend of events had brought her to Norwich, and the proximity of her childhood's days.

Yet it must not be imagined that Jenny had allowed herself to forget entirely the old couple who had been responsible for her existence. From time to time she had sent them presents of money, with a short note to say that she was well and happy. Sometimes too, her heart would tell her that she was doing wrong in not going down to the little cottage in person and reminding the old parents of her existence in some tangible form. And yet she never went. Neither had she confided to any one, not even to Hazel Harlow, her bosom friend, the true story of her parentage.

It was a cold December morning. A bright fire burnt on the earth and threw a cheerful glow upon the simple furniture of the cottage kitchen. In front of the fire, smoking a well-blackened clay pipe, sat old John Lovelace. Martha, like the good old housewife she was, was bustling about, making the spotless cleanliness of the place still more spotless.

Suddenly there came a sharp rat-tat at the door. The next moment the latch was lifted, and an elderly man in the garb of a postman thrust in his head.

"Mornin'," he cried cheerfully, "mornin' John, mornin' to ye, Mrs. Lovelace. I've a letter for ye. A letter from furrin' parts."

Here was a surprise indeed. A letter from foreign parts. The postman disappeared, leaving the old woman peering with an almost frightened expression at the crinkly yellow envelope, adorned with an altogether unfamiliar and novel postage-stamp.

In the meanwhile John had risen from his chair, and had placed a pair of huge horn-rimmed spectacles upon his nose.

"Let's have a look at it, mother," he cried, "Who on earth can be writing to ye from over the sea?"

But Mrs. Lovelace's face had assumed an almost ashen hue. She sank down into a chair, and murmured in a low voice: "It's Dick, John. I'm sure it must be. Who else could it be? I knew we should hear of him again. Can it be true? Can it be true?"

John Lovelace took hold of the letter and gazed with awe at the crabbed, unfamiliar handwriting. Then, with trembling hand, he tore open the cover.

"Sit ye down, Marthy," he said gently. "Let me read it out. Maybe it's from some one else."

But the first words of the letter proved how true the old mother's instincts had been.

"Dear Mother"—a cry fell from Martha's lips. "I knew it, I knew it!" she cried, and the tears streamed down her withered cheeks. "Praise God, it's our Dick. Read on, father, read on."

"Dear Mother," the old fellow went on in a voice that trembled suspiciously. "I expect you will be very surprised to hear from me after all these years. I don't even know if this will find you. I hope it will, and that you and father are still living in the old cottage. For I'm coming home to see you. I've been a bad son to you, but I've never forgot you, and I hope you'll forgive me when you see me and hear my news. I never was much of a letter writer, so I shan't say any more. In a day or so I hope to be with you for I shall be here nearly as soon as my letter, when I shall tell you all that has happened. With love to you both and Jenny, I am your affec. son, RICHARD LOVELACE."

For a few moments after the reading of this somewhat meagre note the old couple sat motionless, gazing into one another's face. It seemed almost too good to be true. Dick was coming back. The silence of twenty long years had been broken, Dick was coming back.

John was the first to speak. "He sends his love to Jenny," he said somewhat huskily. "I wonder where Jenny is, mother. We heard from her not so very long ago. She sent us five pounds. She's been a good daughter to us has Jenny. Only I wish we'd seen something of her. It's a long time since she were

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here. I should like to write to her and tell her that Dick's coming back."

CHAPTER II.

"I've a long confession to make to you, Hazel."

It was Jenny Lovelace who spoke. The two girls were seated in the sitting-room of the lodgings they had taken in Norwich in view of the week they were to spend in that city, before proceeding to London for the final engagement of the *Good Samaritan* Company on tour.

"A confession," answered Hazel gaily. "Well, I'll promise you that you'll find a good father confessor in me. Begin, and let me see whether I can give you absolution."

But Jenny's face was very grave. Hazel looked at her in some consternation.

"What's amiss, Jenny?" she asked sympathetically.

"First of all," came the low-voiced answer, "I've followed in your footsteps and become engaged."

Hazel uttered a glad little cry. "Oh, Jenny," she said, "who to? I only hope he will make you as happy as Eric has me"—for the announcement of Hazel's engagement to Eric Monteith had now been publicly announced—"and when did it happen? And why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because it only happened last night, between the second and third acts of the show. It's to Raymond Venables. He asked me to marry him, and though I've never said a word to anyone, yet, I've cared for him a long time, only I didn't think he cared for me. But I asked him to say nothing about it until I'd had a talk with you. For oh, Hazel—"—the girl's voice was quite the reverse of what would have been expected from a newly-engaged person—"I'm not at all happy."

"Not at all happy!" echoed the other in a voice of real concern, rising and crossing to her friend's side. "Why, Jenny, dear, what on earth makes you talk like that? If you care for Raymond Venables, and he cares for you, surely nothing else can matter?"

"But that's not all," came the reply, in a low voice. "I've another confession to make. Haven't you ever wondered why I never spoke of my parents, Hazel?"

"No," answered Hazel stoutly, "it was quite enough for me to have you for my friend without bothering about your private affairs. What has that got to do with your engagement?"

"Just this, that Raymond thinks that I am well-born, and well connected, and I can't bear to tell him the truth that my parents are just simple cottagers, quite poor people. Oh, Hazel, I've been very wicked. And now I feel that I must tell him, and I can't help thinking that it will make a difference, that Raymond will never forgive me for not having told him before. And besides, it has been so cruel and cowardly on my part, to take no notice, or hardly any, of the poor old people that were responsible for bringing me into the world," and Jenny broke down entirely and burst into a flood of tears.

As can be well imagined, Hazel was seriously perturbed at such an outburst on the part of her friend.

Jenny broke down entirely, and burst into a flood of tears.

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Little by little she drew the whole story from Jenny's lips, of the old couple living so near to the very place in which they then were, of how Dick Lovelace had run away, and how Jenny herself had followed her brother's example, though not in quite so covert a manner.

Hazel was rather at a loss to know what to say when Jenny had come to the end of her confession, and after a few moments' silence she said softly. "There is only one thing for you to do, Jenny. Tell Raymond everything that you have told me. If he really loves you he won't mind the fact that your parents are what they are. Go and see your parents and try and make up for having neglected them so long. I will go with you with pleasure. And why not ask Raymond to go too?"

"But I care for him so much," sobbed the other. "And suppose he should be angry with me for having deceived him. Supposing his love for me was to go when he found out how heartless I've been. It makes me feel a coward, Hazel."

"Then let me tell him for you?" went on Hazel. "Let me explain the whole story? And then to-morrow we will go and see your father and mother. You'll see that Raymond won't think any the worse of you because of an accident of birth.

True to her word, Hazel went off at once in search of the manager, whom she found in his office.

"Jenny has told me her news," she began, "and I need hardly say how happy I am. I think you are a very lucky man, Mr. Venables. But Jenny is not altogether happy, and I have come here on her behalf."

The manager looked puzzled, and somewhat perturbed. "Jenny unhappy?" he queried. "Why?"

In as few words as possible, Hazel explained the situation. When she had finished Venables held out his hand with a smile.

"If it's nothing worse than that," he said cheerily, "I don't mind. To be frank with you, Miss Harlow, my own father was a respectable cheesemonger in the Borough, in London. He's dead and gone now, poor old chap, and I've never talked about him, not because I was a bit ashamed of him, but merely because I don't see the use of obtruding one's private affairs into undue notice, especially on the stage. So you can give Jenny a kiss from me, and tell her just what I've told you, and we'll go and see her old people just whenever she's a mind. Why, hang it all, I suppose I ought to ask them to give their consent to my marrying their daughter."

CHAPTER III.

It was the second day after the arrival of Dick's letter. John and Martha had just finished their mid-day meal, and were seated before the fire, talking in low voices about the one topic that was now of any interest to them, the unexpected return of the long-lost son.

It was raining in torrents. Suddenly there came a knock at the door of the cottage. John started to his feet. The colour faded from Martha's face. The old couple exchanged glances. Neither spoke a word.

With tremulous steps Lovelace went across to the door, and threw it open. The wet rain blew in upon his face. A man was at the door, a tall well-knit figure, who entered the cottage almost stealthily. It was then seen that he was clad in the blue reefer jacket and trousers of a merchant sailor.

"Dick!" With a cry, Martha rose to her feet, and tottered across the room to fling herself into the sailor's arms. "Dick, my boy, is it really you?"

"Yes, mother, it's I." The voice seemed almost painfully rough. "I'm wet through. Isn't it awful weather? I've come straight on from London, and it's just as bad there."

A sharp stab of pain seemed to penetrate the old woman's heart. As for John, he could only stand as though spellbound, and regard the dripping figure before him. Was this the homecoming? Was this the way to re-enter the home that had been unvisited for twenty years?

The young man, a sturdy, brown-faced fellow enough, and by no means ill-favoured of face, turned awkwardly to his father.

"Hello, dad," he said, with an attempt at a smile, "how are you? You must excuse my coming on to you like this, but the fact is I had an accident in London. I had only just enough money to pay my fare. The fact is"—he spoke hurriedly, as though constrained to talk—"I haven't done what I hoped to do abroad. I'm stony broke. Nearly twenty years knocking about from 'Frisco to Sydney, and from Rio to the Bay of Biscay, is calculated to take the stuffing out of a fellow."

The old couple gazed helplessly at the young man, trying to take in what he meant. Then John, feeling that it was incumbent upon him to say something, remarked mechanically: "Ay, I suppose you're right, them furrin' parts must be something terrible. Why did ye run away, Dick?"

Dick shrugged his shoulders with a ghastly attempt at a smile. Then he went on in a reckless voice: "Hang it all, I don't know. I was a fool. It's a dog's life I've had, a dog's life."

Martha's tears were flowing freely now. She brushed aside the evidence of her despairing disappointment, and faltered out:

"Why, Dick, we thought—your letter said—you—"

"Yes, I know, I know," cried Dick, trying to keep his voice calm, "I wanted to let you down as gently as possible. The fact is, I've come the Dickens of a cropper. I've had a fearful streak of bad-luck! I want money, and I thought that perhaps you'd be able to help me. I'll pay it all back again in a day or two."

Dead silence followed these words. Then John advanced to the younger man's side. "Is that why you wrote to your mother," he said, in a low choked voice, "for money? You ask for money before you've told a word about how you've got on all these years, before you've even given your mother a kiss?"

"I can't help it," the sailor said fiercely. "I'm at my wits' ends. And to whom can a man come when he's down on his luck if it's not to the man to whom he owes his existence?"

This last speech proved too much for poor old Martha. She sank down in a chair, and burying her face in her hands, gave herself up to a paroxysm of weeping.

As for John, he seemed like a man dazed. He stood and looked at Dick with drawn, white face, trying to take in what it all meant. Then he cleared his throat and asked: "What do ye want money for, Dick? What bother have ye got into?"

"I can't tell you. I can only tell you this, that I'm in a fearful hole, and if I don't have a hundred pounds before to-morrow, I shall be clapped into gaol. It's no fault o' mine."

The old man answered him never a word. He turned away, and opening a door that led out of the tiny apartment, left mother and son alone.

The old woman raised her head as her husband disappeared. "Dick, Dick," she wailed. "What does

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it all mean? Are you really the little Dick that ran away from home twenty years agone?"

The other nodded. "I'm sorry," he began almost shamefacedly, "but Fate's been too hard for me. I can't help it. I'm broke."

"And so is my heart!" moaned the old woman. "This is the homecoming we have looked forward to so much."

"Why won't you understand?" broke in the man roughly, "What else was left for a poor broken wretch such as I to do? It's you who drove me off in the first place, and now you expect me to come back and deceive you about my real position."

"But your letter, Dick, remember what you said in that, how that—" but again she was cut short.

"What's the good of perpetually harping on the same string? It's facts we've got to deal with, not useless sentiment. I hoped when I ran away that I should come back rich, and be able to help you. But I can't, so you had much better do for me what I would have done for you if I had been able, set me on my legs again. It's only a temporary loan I want. I'll pay you back," but the re-entry of the old man cut short any further excuses which the young fellow would have put forward.

Lovelace had a coarse canvas bag in his hands, which he threw down upon the old oak table of the kitchen.

"Here's all the money we have," he said, in a hollow voice. "It's about a hundred and fifty pounds, and I thought as how it would just do to keep the missus and me from the Union. But if it is to save you from disgrace, Dick, well, you must take it, and I must try and make a fresh start."

It was for this, then, that Dick Lovelace had returned after twenty years.

CHAPTER IV.

Upon a bed in the accident ward of the London Hospital, lay the motionless form of a man. So still he lay that the casual observer would have been perfectly justified in believing him to be dead. His grey face was swathed in a bandage, that was bound turban-wise across his forehead. Over him bent a young doctor, beside whom was standing a nurse in uniform.

"A bad case," the surgeon was saying, "and he's been unconscious all night. He's concussed badly, and there's an ugly wound upon his chest that was only prevented from being fatal by the merest accident. He may be unconscious for another twenty hours, or—" he shrugged his shoulders with the air of a man who was used to passing sentence on such desperate cases as these without more ado than that of an expressive shrug. "If there's any change in his condition, nurse, let me know at once."

The 'sister' gazed down upon the motionless figure with compassion. He was quite a young man, with thick chestnut curls behind the bandage, and a clean-shaven handsome face. His arms were tattooed profusely, for he was a sailor who had been picked up in a quiet street off the docks, and brought to the hospital for dead.

"Poor young fellow," the nurse murmured to herself. "How terribly sad to think that he should have been struck down like this." She was only a probationer, and was not yet accustomed to all the terrible scenes that the servants of a big London hospital are daily called upon to witness.

He dashed out through the door, sweeping both Eric and Venables off their feet.

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Suddenly a long shuddering cry left the man's lips. He gave a faint movement. The nurse was instantly all alert.

A faint colour came back to his grey face. "I'd better call Dr. Ramsden," she muttered.

By the time the doctor returned to the sick man's bedside there was a distinct change in the condition of the patient. His lips were moving fitfully. Snatches of incoherent sentences left his mouth. The delirium that so often accompanies a bad concussion of the brain had seized hold of him.

"Keep her before it. Let her run—the dirty weather can't last—this is only half-a-gale—there's no beating to windward in this, though—" the poor fellow was evidently aboard ship once more.

Then his voice changed. "I tell you it was my fault, Bill," he murmured and so low that it was all that the doctor could do to catch what he said. "It was all my fault but when I get home again, I mean to make up for all I did—better stow away some of that canvas, sir—we shall have our sticks carried away if not," and so off again into the technicalities of a man before the mast.

Then suddenly his tones changed again, and he plunged into the recital of a story that made the doctor listen with every nerve strained, a story that suddenly gave him a clue to the whole black business that must have been the cause of bringing him into the great hospital.

It was just as if the doctor had suddenly been translated to the forecastle of a sailing-ship. The delirious man addressed him by name, the name of 'Bill.'

"Listen, Bill," he said, "and I'll tell you why I'm going back to England. Then you can judge for yourself, and you've been a good mate to me, Bill. That's why I tell you what I've never told a soul since I made my pile."

The doctor listened to the story with bated breath. Then he took a note-book out of his pocket, and made a note of what he had heard.

"This is a business for the police, not a doctor," he muttered, "but at least what the poor fellow says ought to be tested. And for the sake of what I've just listened to, I'll see the matter through myself."

True to his word, as soon as his duties would allow him, Dr. Ramsden went round to a neighbouring police-station, and laid the case, as he imagined it to be, before the divisional superintendent. The official heard him out attentively, for Ramsden was known and respected in the neighbourhood.

"There's certainly something in what you say, sir," said the superintendent, when Ramsden had finished his story, and I'll telephone to headquarters at once. From all accounts, unless the poor fellow was romancing in his delirium, the matter calls for urgent attention. Anyhow, I'll do what I can to have the matter thoroughly sifted."

CHAPTER V.

"Well, it's no good waiting for the weather to think better of itself," said Hazel. "We've waited two days now. If we go on like this we shall find ourselves at the end of our tether, and on the way to London. What do you say, Jenny? Shall we go and see your parents this afternoon? I'm longing to see them, and I'm sure you ought to be doing the same."

"So am I," answered Jenny in a subdued tone," and yet I can't help looking forward to the visit with a certain amount of apprehension. Ever since I had that talk with you about it Hazel, I've been thinking how almost criminal it has been of me to neglect them so long. And now that you and Raymond have been so good to me about it, why it makes my conduct stand out in all the more horrid a light. And yet I do long to see them and ask for forgiveness. I should like, too, to try and make up in some way for the long years of neglect."

"I'm awfully glad to hear you speak like that, Jenny," replied the other gently, "because I must acknowledge that your conduct has not been all it should have been I can't help feeling how awfully sad and lonely it must have been for them both all these years, with their only son and daughter away from them. I suppose you've never heard anything of your brother since he ran away," for Jenny had told the story of her poor old parents to her friend.

"Not a word, I'm afraid he must be dead. Oh, Hazel, how wicked and thoughtless I've been. Yes, let's go this afternoon. Raymond and Eric will be round here directly. So let's get ready."

Hardly were the words out of her mouth before the two young men were announced.

Hazel at once told them that Jenny and she were desirous of making the expedition to the cottage that had been the former's home, and needless to say, both the lovers were willing to fall in with the plans of their respective brides to be.

"But we can't walk there in this weather," said Eric, "wait till I go and fetch a carriage from the "Maid's Head," a plan, needless to say, that found ready favour with the two girls.

There was but scanty conversation between the quartette during the drive that took them through Norwich, and out into the open country. Each was fully occupied in his or her own reflections. Upon all the feeling lay heavy that they were in a way about to participate in a particularly solemn event, though as is so often the case, the reality was to be far more poignant than the anticipation.

At last the carriage came to a halt. Eric was the first to alight, to find himself standing in a lonely, rain-swept road, opposite a small thatched cottage that was set back from the road, and with a trim little garden facing it.

Giving directions for the carriage to await their coming out, Eric helped the ladies out in silence.

Jenny was very pale. "Come on," she whispered to Hazel, who stood silently sympathetic at her side, "Let us go inside."

They walked up to the weatherbeaten door, with the two men following close at their heels. The sound of voices within caused them to pause irresolutely. A man's voice rang out with startling distinctness, in rough, almost fierce accents: "Thank you, dad, it's only for a day or two. I'll repay it. It's a rum sort of home coming, but—well, what's the use of crying over spilt milk?"

To the four outside the words could be heard as plainly as though they were inside the house itself. They stole furtive glances at each other. Then another voice, a quavering and aged one, evidently a woman's, sent the blood into Jenny's face, and caused her to hold her breath in almost fear.

"But you're not going, Dick?" the old voice wailed out, "You haven't come back after all these years only to go away again?"

The words seemed to galvanise Jenny into sudden action. "Dick!" she gasped out, "Merciful Heaven, it's Dick come back! What can it all mean?" And the next moment she had flung open the door, and stormed inside.

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In the centre of the kitchen, with a coarse canvas bag in his right hand, a man was standing, a young fellow with a tanned face, clad in seaman's garb. On either side of him stood her father and mother, both with grief-stricken countenances.

As Jenny entered, the young fellow turned round with a quick lithe action, and, seeing the other three beside her, uttered an exclamation of the purest astonishment.

"What does this mean?" cried Jenny, "Is this Dick? Father, mother, don't you know me? I'm Jenny, your Jenny, come to see you."

"Jenny!" It was John Lovelace's voice. He tottered forward, and held out his arms. The next moment Jenny's head was upon his breast.

Then Dick Lovelace did an extraordinary thing. He gave vent to a cry of rage, and springing forward, the canvas bag still clenched firmly in his right hand, dashed out through the door, sweeping both Eric and Venables off their feet with the impetuosity of his movement.

Eric found his feet in an instant. His quick brain began to have some faint glimmering of the true state of affairs. He threw one swift glance around him. The next moment he had dashed out through the open door, and was away in hot pursuit of the runaway.

The memory of the days when he had first won laurels upon the cinder path at Oxford came back to him, as with elbows against his sides, bounding forward upon his toes with all the elegant ease of a practised sprinter, he set himself to the task of running the other man down.

It was a strange race. Neither was it long before the fugitive discovered that he was pursued.

A glance over his shoulder as he sped along the road heavy with mire, showed him the quick, strenuous figure of Monteith bounding along in his wake with his long, easy, practised stride.

"The going's more heavy than I care about," ran Eric's unspoken thoughts, "and I'm shockingly out of training for a cross-country contest like this. And that fellow can run too. I haven't gained much upon him yet. I wonder what he's got inside that canvas bag. He seems to clutch it pretty tightly. But I think I'm pulling him back slowly."

Slowly the gap between the two lessened. Inch by inch Eric drew up to the runaway. A wild feeling of exultation seized hold of him. He knew that he had worn his man down at last.

Neither was the other slow to realise this fact himself. He threw a look over his shoulder again. Another ten yards, and his unknown hunter would have closed with him.

The next moment a revolver was pointed at Monteith's head.

With a cry of baffled rage and fury he spun suddenly round and faced Monteith. His hand went to his breast, the hand that was unencumbered by the canvas bag that had already aroused Eric's curiosity, and that contained, as we know, the hard-earned savings of poor old John Lovelace. The next moment a revolver was pointed at Monteith's head. But Eric saw the movement in time. He ducked quickly as the shot rang out. A bullet whistled over his head. Then, before the fellow had time to fire again, Monteith's arms were round his middle, and he was thrown violently to the ground.

His head came against a big stone in the roadway, effectually knocking out what little resistance was left in him.

The race was over, the victory was with the trained athlete.

CHAPTER VI.

When Eric got back to the little cottage, after having disposed of his captive at a neighbour-

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ing farm, securely bound until he could send the police to apprehend him, with a substantial guarantee to the farmer of his own *bona-fides*, it was to find that yet another actor had appeared upon the scene, in the person of a Scotland-Yard detective.

The canvas bag Eric also brought back. The story he was to hear had best be told in the detective's own words.

Doctor Ramsden was responsible for this, which was in fact the substance of the delirious man's story in the hospital.

"After the poor chap had raved a bit," the detective said, "he suddenly changed his voice. He seemed to think that he was aboard ship again, and talking to a mate named Bill. As near as I can remember, this is what the doctor said came from his lips:

"'I ran away from home twenty years ago, Bill. I left my poor old father and mother, without caring a bit what became of them. I got to South America, and there as you know, I made my pile. Thank goodness that the money's safely banked. We've been good pals, you and I, Bill, and I've told you all about the old folks, and where they live, haven't I? Yes, so sure as my name's Dick Lovelace, I'll get back to Norwich—why, what's the matter, Bill?—what's that you say? ah, my head.'"

"And then the poor fellow set to raving again, but the doctor had heard enough. He saw it all. How that the poor fellow had confided in his false friend, who must have knocked him on the head, and come off to Norwich, to try and rob the people whom he knew would be ready to believe he was their son, as they hadn't seen him for twenty years."

The detective's audience had listened to him spell-bound. After he had finished, poor old Martha broke out afresh into a terrible outburst of weeping. It all seemed so unreal, so horribly incredible to her. Small wonder that her simple old mind refused to take in the full meaning of the dark story. Jenny was sobbing in her father's arms. Yet he found heart to whisper.

"Then it wasn't our Dick after all. Thank God for that."

But it was not until many weeks after that the real Dick Lovelace was enabled, when he slowly struggled back to consciousness and health, to supply the full details of the sinister story.

It appeared that the false Dick's real name was Bill Adams, and that he was the mate of the vessel that had brought young Lovelace back to England. Dick had first met Adams in Rio, and his honest heart warming up to a fellow countryman in that far-distant land, he had taken him fully into his confidence, and told him all about the old people towards whom his footsteps were now bent. Apparently Adams was a man absolutely without principle, a man, too, who was heavily in debt. He must, from Dick's story, have retained the impression that the old couple in Norwich were in far better circumstances than they really were.

For it seemed incredible that he should have risked so much for the hope of such small plunder that he could get from old John and his wife.

But Fate, had proved too strong for Bill Adams. He had shot his bolt, and his own villainy had brought him to the ground.

The old couple were rather overwhelmed when Venables told them the real reason that had brought him to see them, how that he had come to ask them if he might pay his addresses to Jenny with a view of early matrimony. It was John who answered him.

"She's always been a good daughter to us," he said after a pause, "and I hope as how you'll make her happy, sir. I'm sure our Jenny's fit to marry the highest gentleman in the land. She ain't rough, like me. She's a lady. I gives her to you, Mr. Venables, with an old man's blessing."

* * * * *

It was a clear cold morning in January. The scene is again the old cottage where John and Martha are alone.

There came a quick rat-tat-tat at the door. With surprising agility for a man of his years, John sprang from his chair and threw it open. A man entered the room, followed by a girl.

"Father, mother, it's I really this time, your son Dick come back to you safe and sound."

"Dick!" The word fell from the lips of the two old people simultaneously. The next moment the young fellow had his strong arms round them, tears of joy were running down old Martha's furrowed cheeks.

Then Dick spoke. "I've brought some one with me, mother," he said gently, "someone I want you to care for very much for my sake. I've brought you a new daughter, the woman who pulled your son back to life after Bill Adams had done his best to kill me. Maggie, this is mother and father. This is Maggie"—to the old people he spoke now—"who was my nurse in the hospital, and who has promised to become my wife."

Then Dick drew his old parents to their chairs in the chimney corner, and with his sweetheart by his side, told them the story of the twenty years he had spent out there across the seas.

"And I am rich, now," he said in conclusion, "there's no need for you to bother any more about the future. There's quite enough for all of us. I'm going to take a farm down here, and you and dad, mother, have got to come and live with Maggie and me. We've settled all that between us, Maggie and I, so you needn't think that you'll be putting us out, or anything like that. You shall have your own rooms in the house, and dad can help me to get straight, and Maggie says she wants you to teach her housekeeping, mother."

Before the end of the month, Maggie and Dick were married, and John and Martha were installed in their new quarters as their son's guests for the remainder of their lives.

The remainder of the week at Norwich passed away uneventfully enough so far as *The Good Samaritan* Company were concerned.

The end of the tour was now in sight. Next week would see the Company in London, to fulfil a final engagement at the Coronet Theatre in Notting Hill.

And after the tour was really over, with the dawn of the New Year, the year that was to bring such sweet content to old John Lovelace and his wife, there was to be a double wedding, when Eric and Hazel, Raymond Venables and Jenny Lovelace, were to enter upon a new life as wedded couples.

(Next week's "Short Stories" will contain the final adventure of Hazel Harlow in her theatrical career. In it Hazel will make her bow for the last time before a public of readers who have evidently followed her adventures with the keenest appreciation and interest, as the numerous letters received on the subject have testified. This episode will be found to be no less enthralling than its forerunners, relating, as it does the last desperate attempt of Hazel's most hated enemy to bring about her undoing.)

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Detective Competition.

First Prize . . . £5.

Second to Eleventh Prizes 10s. each.

And Numerous Other Prizes of Books and Pencil-cases.

Conditions.

(1.) The first prize will be awarded to the competitor who sends in the most complete list. The second to eleventh prizes will be awarded to the senders of the ten next most complete lists, and so on.

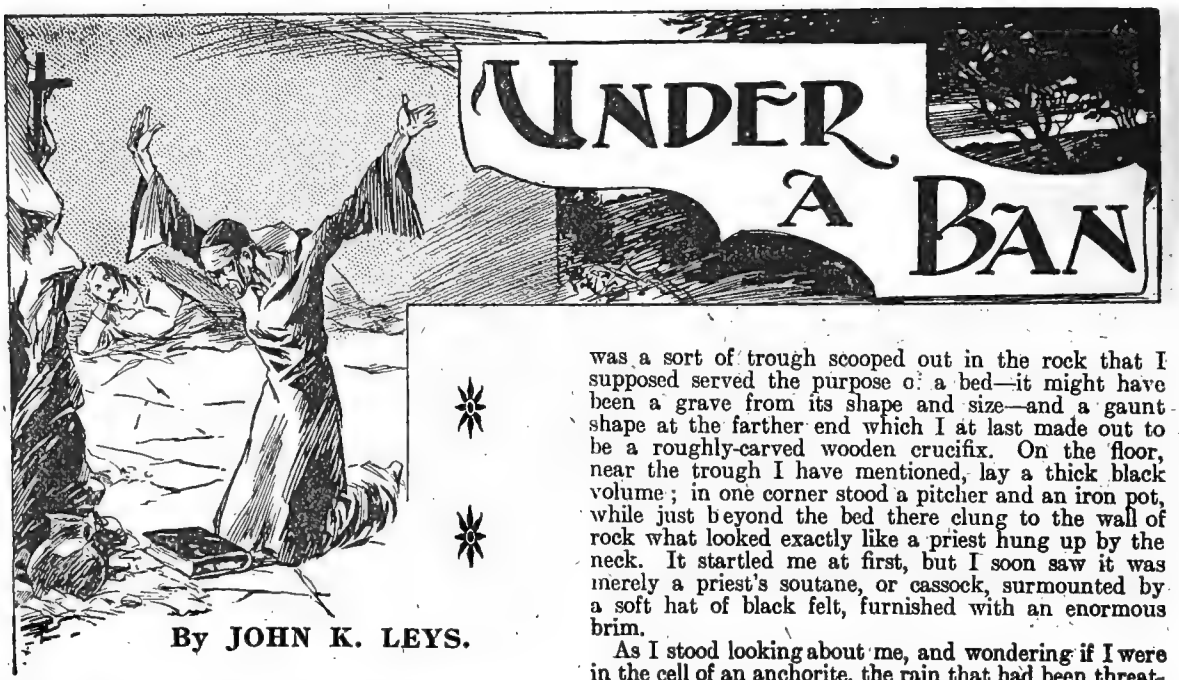
(2.) Send your attempts, written on one side of the paper only, in an envelope marked "Detective," to *Short Stories*, 18 Henrietta Street, Strand, London, W.C., so as to arrive by first post on Tuesday, December 31st.

(3.) In the event of a tie, the prizes will be divided at the Editor's discretion, and competitors must only enter on that understanding.

Below is given the picture of a room from which the number of occupants, their habits and peculiarities can be gathered. What you have to do is to write your answers to the following questions.

1. (a) Number of adults, if any. (b) Why?
2. (a) Number of children, if any. (b) Why?
3. (a) Nature of meal. (b) Why?
4. (a) Who of them, if any, is left-handed? (b) Why?
5. (a) Who of them, if any, is careless? (b) Why?
6. (a) Who of them, if any, is very tidy? (b) Why?
7. (a) Who of them, if any, has a moustache? (b) Why?
8. (a) Who of them, if any, has bad sight? (b) Why?
9. (a) In which chair, if any, was a female sitting? (b) Why?
10. (a) In which chair, if any, was a young man sitting? (b) Why?

For example, the answer to question No. 7 should be written: 7. (a) The man who occupies the chair at the end of the table facing the arm-chair. (b) He has a moustache-cup before him.



By JOHN K. LEYS.

Some years ago I was in Mexico prospecting for silver. Silver mines were more worth having in those days than they are now; and on the whole I did pretty well. The adventure I am going to tell happened to me in the early eighties, when I was wandering, a lonely and disappointed man, among the peaks of the Sierra Madre.

It was growing towards dusk, and I should have lost my way if it had not been for the fact that all ways were much the same to me just then. I knew the direction I was going in, and that was all. I had seen nothing but some wretched coyotes all day, and had no prospect but that of camping out with only a morsel of jerked beef for supper, when I was surprised at seeing a bright flame on the mountain side, a little to the right, and some distance above me.

Without an instant's hesitation I made for the fire, thinking, of course, that it had been made by a homeless wanderer like myself; when I saw to my surprise that it was built in front of an adobe, or mud hut, such as are common in that part of the country.

The strange thing was to see a human habitation in that desolate region, some miles from the nearest village, twenty-nine from the nearest township. The hut was built under the lee of a rock which formed one of its walls. It was, in fact, what is called a lean-to. I peered about as well as the gathering darkness would allow me, but could see no one.

Quietly dismounting, I went forward, holding my horse's bridle in one hand, and a loaded revolver in the other. But I walked right up to the door of the hut without seeing any one.

I was surprised at this, for the state of the fire showed that the man who had built it could not be very far away; but I was yet more astonished when I lifted the sheet of bark that served for a door, and glanced inside the hovel. None of the rude furniture common in camp life was to be seen—no deal boxes made up to serve as tables, no stump chairs, no rough shelving, no mining tools, no whisky-bottle candle-stick. Instead, there was a sort of trough scooped out in the rock that I supposed served the purpose of a bed—it might have been a grave from its shape and size—and a gaunt shape at the farther end which I at last made out to be a roughly-carved wooden crucifix. On the floor, near the trough I have mentioned, lay a thick black volume; in one corner stood a pitcher and an iron pot, while just beyond the bed there clung to the wall of rock what looked exactly like a priest hung up by the neck. It startled me at first, but I soon saw it was merely a priest's soutane, or cassock, surmounted by a soft hat of black felt, furnished with an enormous brim.

As I stood looking about me, and wondering if I were in the cell of an anchorite, the rain that had been threatening to fall all the afternoon came down in a torrent, a deluge that forced every living thing to seek for shelter.

The fire was reduced in a moment to a heap of smouldering ashes, and my horse, poor fellow, nosed his way past me into the hut.

I backed him up against the rock, where there was just room for him to stand, and I had scarcely done so when the dark interior was made yet more dark by a tall figure appearing in the doorway.

I was in the act of forcing my steed to vacate his comfortable corner under the rock, when the owner of the hut—for it was he—stepped forward, placed a wet palm on the creature's steaming flank, and gravely shook his head. It was a sign that the animal might remain where it was.

"I'm awfully sorry I let the brute push its way in," I began; but I got no answer. I heard a fumbling in one corner, then the striking of a match, and next moment the glimmer of a wax candle-end from a tiny shelf lit up the hut.

The man now revealed was tall and spare, so tall that his head seemed to reach to the roof of the adobe—so spare that the candle-light made his thin face seem positively transparent. He wore a stained and patched cloak, now dripping with wet, but he did not seem to mind this in the least.

With one hand he took off his hat, and with the other he made a sweeping gesture, as much as to intimate that the hut and its contents were at my disposal. At the same time his face was lit up by a smile of singular sweetness. But when I began to thank him, renewing my apologies for my intrusion, his eyes fell before mine, and he stood humbly before me, his broad-brimmed hat in his hand, like a servant in the presence of his master.

The only response he made was to smile and shake his head, from which I understood that my entertainer was deaf or dumb—perhaps both.

My host now set about preparing supper. From a

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corner he produced a dish filled with a quantity of boiled beans, and as he placed the beans on a log which was the only furniture which the hovel possessed, he gave a glance at the ashes of the fire, as much as to say that they must be eaten cold, since the hut had no chimney. It was then, I think, that I first noticed the extreme sweetness in the expression of my host's face. It was not a handsome face, by any means, but it positively shone with what I may call an exalted, an etherealised benignity, that I felt something of the wondering devotion which one reads of the old saints inspiring in their followers. No mere physical beauty, in man or in woman, could have produced the same effect on me.

The beans, with a loaf of coarse bread, and a pannikin of water from the pitcher, formed our supper. I produced my jerked beef, and invited my host to partake of it, but with a bow of acknowledgment he declined. We sat, one on either end of the log, with the beans and bread between us, and ate our food.

During the progress of the silent meal I was struck by the emaciated appearance of my host's face and hands, and of his whole figure—a result which I attributed to the unwholesome spareness of his diet. Tearing a leaf out of my pocket-book, I wrote upon it in Spanish: "You ought not to refuse to eat meat. Your health is suffering for the want of it."

He read the paper when I handed it to him, but merely shook his head with a smile by way of answer.

Again I wrote: "I know something of medicine, and I tell you it is slow suicide," and handed the leaf to him.

For an instant a troubled look crossed the man's face, but in a moment it was gone, and the old imperturbable smile appeared again. With a shrug of the shoulders that must have seemed somewhat unfeeling, I tore up the paper, and, rising from my seat, began to get my horse out, and picket him close to the hut. The rain had now ceased, and the new moon shone through the foliage like the face of a friend.

When I returned to the hut I found that its owner had made what preparations he could for our night's rest. He had lighted a small lamp surrounded by a ruby-coloured glass, and suspended it before the crucifix at the other end of the hut. This gave us light enough to turn in by, for the candle-end had burnt itself out. From the trough-like sleeping-place in the wall my host had brought a bundle of bean-straw, which he had spread on the floor for me. I at once began to gather it up with the intention of returning it to its place: but a gentle, firm hand was laid on my arm, and I desisted, as a child might have done, without a word. Then my host held out his right hand, but suddenly withdrew it, and lay down at full length in his sleeping place.

In the middle of the night I awoke, and looked around me without stirring. At the farther end of the hut, opposite the crucifix, my host was kneeling, his arms outstretched, as the arms of the Christ before him. How long he had been kneeling there I could not tell. But after a time the strain on his muscles became insupportable; he joined his hands, and bending forward till they touched the ground and his forehead rested upon them, he remained in that posture for some time.

And then again the arms were raised, and slowly outstretched as they had been before. From time to time the low sound of a voice reached me, but no form of word, and once at least I caught the sound of a sob.

I could only lie still. To rise, even for the purpose of quitting the hut would have been to disturb and annoy the recluse, who fancied himself unobserved. I lay and watched till I again fell asleep.

When I next awoke it was broad daylight. I could hear my horse moving about outside. My host was nowhere to be seen. The remains of the dish of beans and the bread were placed within reach of my arm, as if inviting me to eat; but I had no appetite for such hard fare at that hour of the day. I went out, sat down and lit my pipe, and waited for my host. Two hours—three—went by, and he did not come. At length I was forced to the conclusion that he did not mean to return till I had gone.

I saddled my horse, but before I rode away I did a thing of which I felt ashamed while I did it. I looked at the volume I had seen lying beside my host's sleeping-place. It was a Latin breviary, and in it I found a name written: "*Johannes Salvinos, Sacerdos,*" and below the edge of the depression that formed the bed I found cut into the stone in rude letters:

"But I, as a deaf man, heard not, and as one that is dumb, who openeth not his mouth."

* * * * *

It was only natural that, at my first return to the haunts of men, I should make some inquiries about the hermit of the Sierra Madre. But I was met on all sides with looks of aversion and contempt. None seemed willing to speak of a man who was held to be for some reason accursed. And it soon became evident that little or nothing was known of the solitary. He was a priest, all were agreed, who had in some way sinned against his vows, and was undergoing punishment inflicted by his ecclesiastical superiors. None knew where he had come from, except that it must have been from a long way off.

My companion seemed struck with astonishment, and stood staring after them for a moment before going on.

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No one had ever heard him utter a single syllable. He never appeared in the village except to purchase bread or beans, and these commodities were generally placed outside the door by the seller at night and removed by the purchaser before morning, so that all personal intercourse might be avoided. My heart rebelled against this inhuman treatment of a man who, my instinct told me, was better, not worse, than his fellows; but I knew that I was powerless to aid him. Indeed, I was convinced that he would not accept any mitigation of his punishment from any one. I was forced to go on my way and leave him to his fate.

Twelve months went by, and I happened to be in a Mexican town many miles distant from the lonely hut amid the mountains.

I was passing through the principal street one day in the company of a friend—Señor Vicayez—when two nuns with down-bent heads and faces, wrapped in linen like the faces of the dead, crossed the street in front of us. My companion seemed to be struck with astonishment, and stood staring after them for a moment before going on. A few minutes later the nuns crossed our path a second time, and again my friend stared at one of them as if in great surprise. As she came closer I observed her with some curiosity. She was tall and graceful, and walked as if with a natural air of command, a few inches in advance of her companion. In spite of the deathlike pallor of her countenance, and the disfigurement caused by her dress, I could see that she must have been a very beautiful woman.

"What makes you stare at that nun, Vicayez?" I asked. "One might have supposed that the brides of the church would have been safe from your all-devouring eyes."

"Don't be profane, Señor Englishman," said my friend, half in jest, half in earnest. "I know that you British have no feelings of reverence, but that need not make you talk like a pagan."

"Tell me, then, what made you stare so at that nun—the tall one—and I will apologise."

"If I looked a second time at the reverend mother, it was with surprise to see her walking in the public streets. It is the first time, I venture to say, that she has been seen outside the convent walls since she took the veil three years ago. And to think that only a short time before that Donna Isabella was the belle of the city, foremost in every gaiety, the best dancer, the most consummate flirt, the most fascinating—but there! I cannot describe her. You should have seen her!"

"And what made the fascinating Donna Isabella bury herself alive in a convent?"

"Ah! That is a strange story, and a sad one, too. Come into my house—it is close by—and I will tell you the tale over a cigar and a cup of coffee."

When the coffee had been tasted, and the cigars lighted, Señor Vicayez began by saying that after serving as an occasion for a greater number of duels than twenty ordinary girls, Donna Isabella had married one of the wealthiest and most popular of cabaleros—Señor Martin del Laguno.

"It was about a year after the wedding that the whole town was amazed to hear that the body of a cabalero of good birth and greatly respected, Señor Galtazar, had been found on the steps of the principal church with a stiletto between his shoulder blades. His pockets were empty, and a finger-ring containing a diamond of great value, which he always wore, had disappeared from his finger. This seemed to point to murder by a thief; but there were some, even then, who professed to think that the murder had been prompted by vengeance, and that the thefts had been committed merely for the sake of keeping up appearances.

It seemed as though the murderer would never be discovered, but ere Galtazar had been a week in his grave the police made a sudden swoop on one of the murdered man's chief friends, and accused him of being guilty of causing Galtazar's death. This person was none other than Donna Isabella's husband, Señor Martin del Laguno. I am safe in saying that not one person in the city had imagined that there could be a cause of quarrel between the two men, and the murder would certainly have gone undetected had it not been for some secret information given to the police. As it was, so great had been the security of the criminal that he had neglected to remove certain traces of his guilt, and proofs of it were found in abundance. It turned out that the husband was jealous—with what degree of cause will never be known. It is enough to say that no one, even among the most intimate friends of the family, had so much as suspected anything in the nature of an intrigue between del Laguno's wife and his friend.

"But the strange part of the story was that del Laguno, while disdaining to deny the accusation brought against him, asserted with angry oaths and bitter reproaches that he had been betrayed by a priest to whom he had confessed the murder under the seal of confession. He declared most solemnly that he had accidentally discovered his friend's treachery only an hour or two before he took his revenge, and that no one, not even his wife, had the smallest suspicion that there was any ill-feeling between Galtazar and himself. But, struck by remorse, he had gone one night to the church, and confessed the murder to one of the priests, who, he afterwards found, had been Galtazar's bosom friend.

"There were one or two suspicious circumstances which seemed to corroborate the wretched man's statement, the principal one being that the priest had been seen in the act of leaving the house of Galtazar's brother, who had sworn to avenge his death, at three o'clock in the morning on the day when del Laguno was arrested. Of course Galtazar's relatives and the police were equally silent, but del Laguno (with whom everybody sympathised) declared so positively, and with such sincerity of conviction, that the priest had betrayed him, that a great outcry was raised against the priest. This was intensified when the criminal declared his belief on the scaffold, reviling the priest with his latest breath. Two days after the execution, Donna Isabella Vicayez sought refuge in a convent, where she has lived ever since."

"And the priest?" I asked, with an agitation I scarcely cared to conceal.

"He disappeared. No one knows what became of him. It was whispered that he had committed suicide, like Judas. At all events, it was understood that he was dead.

"Some, however, said that, as he belonged to the third order of St. Francis, he had been handed over to the heads of the Franciscan Order to be dealt with as they saw fit. Others even asserted that the story of the false priest's death was a mere report, got up to soothe the popular rage, and prevent it from spreading to the whole priesthood."

"And the name of this unhappy priest was——?"

I fully expected the answer when it came.

"Padre Juan Salvinos."

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The astonishing thing to me was that any one who had seen and known Father Juan Salvinos should have imagined for one moment that he was capable of breaking the seal of confession. I declare that of those who had condemned him not three, probably, knew him even as well as I did, and also that he had not then been purified and ennobled by years of suffering.

That the priest was innocent, I had not in my own mind the shadow of a doubt, but how to bring his innocence to light I knew not. There was one living person, and in all probability one only, who knew the truth of that story of passion and of blood, and that was the nun whom I had seen that day. To her, if to any one, I must make my appeal.

But how was I to get speech of her? I could think of but one way.

That night I went to the convent of the Companions of Jesus, and asked for the Reverend Mother. I was told that I could not see her; but I was prepared for this, and handed the lay sister an envelope which I had brought with me. It contained a sheet of paper on which I had written:

"I bring you news of Padre Juan."

The parlour in which I waited was lighted by one small lamp, which seemed to be on the point of expiring. Its rays struggled feebly with the moonlight, which streamed in through the window that looked out on the convent garden. At the farther end of the room was a grating, but I could see nothing there, for the room beyond was in total darkness.

Suddenly there came out of the darkness a faint rustle. I rose and went up to the grating. From behind it came a voice, faint, indeed, but clear as a dulcimer.

"What have you to tell me of Father Juan? He has been dead for some years."

"He is not dead!" I exclaimed. "He lives and breathes, though he is dead to the world of men. He is living in absolute solitude in a hut among the mountains, his food bread and beans, his drink water, his couch a hole in the rock. For months together, I am convinced, he does not hear the voice of man. It is life in death. And I am certain he has been unjustly condemned. If you know anything that would tend to clear him——"

Up to this point there had been absolute silence behind the grating. But now a low moan fell upon my ears. I could see in the semi-darkness the form of a woman clothed in black standing close to the partition. Her white fingers clutched convulsively at the lattice, as though the frail woodwork had been bare of iron. Then I saw the tall figure of the nun sink lower and lower, till she fell on her knees—till she crouched under the lower part of the wall.

"Oh God, have mercy! What have I done?"

The words burst involuntarily from her lips, and I remained silent.

"I thought he was dead—they told me he was dead—long, long ago! But it is not too late. I will make what reparation I can. I will tell the whole truth. When my——"

"Pardon me, Reverend Mother," I interrupted.

"I saw him pause for a moment, and lay something on the edge of the font."

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"Perhaps you forget that you are speaking to a stranger. Your confessor would no doubt advise you——"

"The whole world shall know the truth!" broke in the clear, resolute voice of the Reverend Mother. She had risen to her feet, and stood drawn up to her full height, in a sort of proud humility. "The whole world shall know what I have done," she repeated, "though I call Heaven to witness that I believed that Padre Juan was dead. But at last the stigma shall be removed. His innocence shall be made clear.

"Listen! Some days after the murder of Señor Galtazar I was in the Church of Our Lady of Sorrows, praying for the repose of his soul. It was almost dark; there was no light except the lamps before the altar and the shrine, and I was at the east end of the church, where the shadows were deepest.

"The sound of a footstep made me raise my head. I looked up, and to my amazement, I saw my husband come down the aisle. He was leaving one of the confessionals. There is little wonder that I was astonished, for except on the occasion of our marriage, my husband was never known to enter a church. He could scarcely have seen me, even if he had been looking in my direction, but as it was, he walked with his eyes bent on the stone floor of the church. He came along slowly till he reached the porch; and then I saw him pause for a moment and lay something on the edge of the font. The next instant he had passed into the porch and was gone.

"Even as I watched him, a suspicion that had before crept into my mind returned stronger than before. I felt that I must know what it was that my husband had deposited on the edge of the font.

"Softly rising from my place I stole with mute feet from column to column till I reached the font.

"I did not touch the ring. I had no need. I knew it well. It had been taken from Miguel's dead hand to make the world suppose that the murder had been committed by an ordinary thief. And now I knew that he, my husband, had treacherously killed the man I loved a thousand times better than my life.

"Yes, I confess it now! I must confess it. It was I who informed the police against my husband, that I might avenge the dead. I left the ring lying where it was, and in a minute or two I heard the priest leave the confessional, and take the ring from the spot where it was lying. He did not see me, for by that time I had crept back to my place. He believed that he was absolutely alone in the church. I understood it all. My husband had confessed his crime, and had asked the priest to take charge of the ring, and restore it to his victim's friends, seeing that it was of some value. The priest had consented to do this, and they had agreed that the ring should be placed on the font, so that the priest and penitent should not meet face to face.

"Well, I did it. I gave information to the police by an anonymous letter. And no sooner had I done this than I repented. How was it possible that I should feel remorse for such a deed all my life? He was my husband. But my repentance came too late. My husband was in prison.

"On the day of his trial I was struck down with fever. I knew nothing more till all was over. They told me that he had died reviling Don Juan as his betrayer, and I intended to confess that I had betrayed my husband; but it was a hard thing to do. Before I could call up courage enough to do it, Don Juan was removed from the city, and shortly after they told me he was dead. I suppose the bishop thought it better not to contradict the report of his death, so that the scandal might be forgotten as soon as possible. There were some who did not believe him guilty, for they say the seal of the confessional has never yet been broken. But they were few in number. The mass of the people believed him to be guilty, and I—wretched one that I am!—kept silence, and suffered his memory to be defamed. But I will make reparation. I will go to the bishop to-morrow; and this very night I will make public acknowledgment of my unnatural crime before the sisters. But that will not expiate my offence or give back Padre Juan the years he has spent in misery. Ah, me! Ah, me!"

The voice ceased. I looked up and found that I was alone.

A week later I was once more riding over the mountain slope that led up to the abode of the hermit priest. A little behind me rode two men furnished with letters from the bishop and from the Provincial of the Franciscan Order. It was an open secret that the letters contained a decree annulling the sentence and deprivation that had been pronounced against Padre Juan Salvinos, with, no doubt, many an expression of regret for the error that had been committed, and of congratulation that the wrong had at last been righted.

It was a clear morning in early autumn, and the sun shone brightly on cloud and mountain peak, on pine tree and river. I quickly recognised the place, for it had been often in my mind's eye during the months that had slipped by since I had been there. I came upon the track that led to the village, followed it up the mountain side, and at length stood at the door of the abode. I had thought how I would ride up with a laugh and a shout, and tell the patient sufferer that his long martyrdom was at an end. But, somehow, I had no heart for laughing and shouting.

I dismounted and knocked on the rough door with the handle of my whip. I expected that the door would have been opened immediately, but there was no reply. The silence was oppressive. One of my companions suggested that the padrone might have gone to the village to buy food. It seemed likely enough, but something told me that it was not so. I knocked again, and then pushed the door open.

The priest lay on the ground at the side of his rocky sleeping place. He was dead. It seemed to us that he must have died that morning. His weary eyes had closed of themselves, and I thought I could trace on the thin, pallid features the same look of patient resignation I had seen on his living face.

His right hand clasped a crucifix to his breast, and he lay so that his last look must have been fixed on the figure of Christ on the Cross at the farther end of the hut. His left arm was under his head—he lay like a tired man taking his rest.

We buried him in the nearest consecrated ground—in the cemetery belonging to the village where he had been in the habit of buying food. The people who had been accustomed to shun him as a creature accursed, now reverenced him as a saint.

By way of a headstone they put up a wooden cross, after the custom of the country; and when I saw it last I found that someone—a brother priest, probably—had carved upon it, by way of epitaph, the words which the hermit had cut on the rock on which he slept—"But I as a deaf man heard not, and as one that is dumb, who openeth not his mouth."

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She was in the arms of a man.

A YULE TIDE DISAPPEARANCE

By Martin H. Potter.

COLONEL AUBREY DARLINGTON stood in his own study at Bracken Hall, intently watching the window which looked out on the lawn.

The room was in perfect darkness—just a shade or two blacker than the wintry clouds had rendered the night.

This almost imperceptible difference in the exterior and interior light, enabled the Colonel to detect two upright posts which protruded above the sill of the window. As he watched, the posts quivered; and taking this as a signal to act, he noiselessly moved from behind the curtains which had been his vantage ground and crossed to the opposite side of the room where he stood with his left hand round the little knob which would ignite the electric globes, whilst his right steadily levelled a revolver in the direction of the window.

A slight scraping became audible in the stillness; and then the head and shoulders of a man suddenly appeared outside the window.

Darlington smiled grimly as he saw some sticky substance pressed against the pane of glass just above the catch; but made no movement even when the intruder reversing his hand described a circle with the stone of a ring he wore.

A current of cold air which reached the Colonel would have told him, if he had not already guessed, that a piece of the glass had been removed.

There was a slight pause; then the catch was slipped back, the sash raised, and the man stepped into the room.

As he did so, Darlington pressed down the knob and flooded the room with electric light.

The man staggered back in surprise; then made a movement towards his hip pocket.

"Kindly keep your hands in front of you," came the voice of the Colonel in equable tones.

The intruder allowed his eyes to rest on the menacing weapon pointing directly at him, and, recognising the futility of a struggle, obeyed.

As he stood revealed, there were few signs of the orthodox "Bill Sykes" about him, if one excepted the black crêpe mask which covered the upper part of his face. His hands were small and white, seemingly more fitted to use a pen than to wield a jemmy. The Norfolk suit which covered his slender but well-knit frame was also hardly in keeping with the character.

Darlington took in these inconsistencies before he again spoke. Then it was to give another order.

"Please tip that ladder, by which you made your somewhat unceremonious entry, into the shrubbery below. I happen to know that it is beyond the strength of one man to rear it up again, so your single comrade in the enterprise will not interrupt us."

The would-be burglar hesitated.

"Do as you are told, man," rang out the Colonel's voice, this time in unmistakable menace. "When I remember that a bullet would effectually put an end to all the trouble, my fingers itch to pull the trigger. Remember, any jury would hold me justified in shooting an armed man whom I found entering my house in the dead of the night."

The man turned to the window and obeyed the behest. The consequent noise was deadened by the thick clump of bushes which occupied the surrounding ground.

As the ladder fell a figure came forward.

"You can go," whispered the man at the window, laconically, "the game is up."

He watched until his friend disappeared and then turned again to Darlington and slipped off his mask.

"There was no need to do that, Louis Cademon; I have known who you were from the first," was the Colonel's comment on the action.

"I caught a glimpse of your face at the Red Lion yesterday morning, consequently expected some such visit as this, and made preparations accordingly. Put your revolver on the table and sit down, I want to talk to you."

Cademon muttered an oath under his breath as he obeyed. The Colonel placed his own revolver beside him.

"You know what I came for," the interloper asserted sullenly, "and that if any other means had been available I should not have condescended to this mummery," indicating the mask with a wave of his hand.

"I know nothing of the kind, Cademon," answered the Colonel sternly. "My dealings with you have taught me that you invariably prefer crooked paths to

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straight, and I guessed that the lapse of eight years would not have materially altered your character."

"*You* of all men to prate of honesty of purpose," said Cademon in savage tones.

There was quiet dignity in Darlington's reply to the taunt.

"My conduct on the occasion, if known, would bring condemnation from men of high honour, but I am going to make atonement, and whatever else I may have been guilty of I can at least say I never deserted a friend at the very moment of all others when he most needed me. You cannot say the same."

He paused for the other to reply but none came, and he continued:

"I suppose you have found out that my daughter Olive," the Colonel's eyes and voice softened as the name left his lips, "is to be married at Christmas; and have especially chosen this moment to attempt the forcing of my hand. Well, you are likely to be dismayed when you hear the course I am going to adopt. On the day before her wedding I shall place the proceeds of that enterprise in her hands. Being a woman she will in all probability guess its value, but if not I shall tell her. She is marrying a comparatively poor man, and I know that she regrets having to go to her husband empty-handed. When I say here is your dowry, my daughter, she will be rejoiced; but, when I also tell her *how and where it was obtained*; *and that the real owner is still living*, I think I know what her response will be. She loves me too well not to look charitably upon my shortcomings, but she will insist upon restitution."

"What! you will give back what we risked our lives to obtain!" exclaimed Cademon.

"What *I* risked my life to obtain," corrected Darlington. "Your memory conveniently overlooks the trifling fact that you backed out when the real danger came."

The younger man coloured up at the accusation, but waived the point.

"I notice that your strict honesty is coeval with your coming into the family estate," he said with a taunting smile.

"You are, to a certain extent, justified in saying that, but the estate is seriously embarrassed and many times I have been tempted to sell and use what is in that safe."

The Colonel pointed to one that was let in the wall.

"Then you do keep it here?" queried Cademon, eagerly.

Darlington nodded grimly, as he answered:

"Yes, your visit would not have been unprofitable if I had not been prepared."

"Come, Darlington. Pray re-consider your decision," urged Cademon. "There is absolutely no need for any such quixotism. Let bygones be bygones. I will grant that your danger was the greater and that therefore your share of the spoil should be larger in proportion, but you will admit that I am entitled to some. Sell it and give me £10,000 and you can rely upon my keeping my tongue quiet about the whole transaction. By these means your daughter will enjoy her dowry; your estate become freed from the mortgages and any little indiscretions of the past consigned to oblivion. It is positively criminal to talk of restitution."

There was no doubt the man was in deadly earnest. His code of honour belonged to a much lower stratum than that of the Colonel; he could not conceive any man wishing to retrieve past peccadilloes at the expense of the present.

His eyes were fixed hungrily upon the safe; greed depicted in their depths.

Aubrey Darlington was too preoccupied with his own thoughts to notice the other's demeanour; or his past knowledge of the man would have warned him against treachery.

In reviewing after events he marvelled that he could

The intruder allowed his eyes to rest on the weapon pointing at him, and obeyed.

have forgotten the conditions under which the interview was taking place. He could only attribute it to the struggle with his own conscience which Cademon's suggestion had reawakened.

For years he had bitterly regretted the indiscretion which had necessitated the enterprise wherein he had fallen from the strict path of honesty; and the resolve to let his daughter be the judge as to whether he should restore his ill-gotten gains had been his only consolation. But now the temptation to let the dead past bury its dead and enjoy the wealth he had gained at the risk of his life, was once more placed before him in a plausible manner by his former confederate.

He longed to be able to give his daughter a fortune to take to her husband, knowing that it would make all the difference to her married life. Moreover he would thus retain her respect and absolute trust in his honour and integrity. As he had told Cademon, he was sure that her love would excuse and forgive his fault, yet she would never again feel exactly towards him as she had done in the past.

Then he had not exaggerated matters regarding the estate; none knew better than himself how heavily it was involved and that years and years of careful nursing were required before it could be clear. Dire poverty in the past had caused Aubrey Darlington's fall, comparative poverty in the present was likely to prevent his rehabilitation.

The battle was short but sharp. Let it be placed to Colonel Darlington's credit that he conquered.

"It is of no use, Cademon," he ejaculated, following out the train of thought. "You know as well as I do that we have no shade of right to utilise it for our own benefit. Any such suggestion is mere sophistry. The suffering and danger we went through were the legitimate means whereby the rightful owner attempted to protect his property from our marauding hands. I shall not waver one iota from the decision already arrived at. Olive shall be my judge. If she considers that I am justified in keeping the ill-gotten gains, you shall have the share you claim. But I warn you, I do not for one moment think that she will."

A still uglier look flitted across the younger man's face as Darlington finished, but it only lasted a moment, and as he rose to his feet he answered:

"I daresay you are right, but it is not of much use preaching morality to a poor wretch who is on his beam ends for a few pounds. At any rate I am unfortunately quite in your hands, so must perforce give in to what you must forgive my saying is a mere whim. Perhaps you will show me the way to your front door, as you have forced me to dispense with my only other way of egress."

The Colonel nodded and they both rose from their seats. Again a malignant look came into Cademon's eyes. He gathered himself together as a leopard does before he makes a spring on his prey. Darlington's hand was on the handle of the door and his head was turned.

Murderous thoughts were coursing through Cademon's brains. He knew the psychological moment had arrived. His limbs relaxed their tension and with a stealthy leap he was on his unprepared victim.

Slim but sinewy fingers gripped the unhappy man's throat. Knees were buried in the small of his back, feet kicked fiercely at the sinews of his legs at the very spot where a sudden blow renders a man helpless.

With a half-stifled cry he sank to the ground. Cademon's knees were now on his victim's chest, slowly but surely aiding his relentless hands in crushing all life from the helpless body.

Slowly the Colonel's eyes started from his head. His face went black and blue, his breath came in thick short gasps, another moment and he would have paid the penalty of forgetfulness with his life; but suddenly a girlish voice broke the silence.

"Take your fingers from his throat, coward, or I'll fire at you."

With an ugly oath, Cademon looked up to find a tall girl, clad in a white dressing-gown, facing him. The unmistakable resemblance to the Colonel told him that he was in the presence of Miss Darlington. She had entered unnoticed during the struggle and had secured her father's revolver from the table.

Olive was trembling with mingled fear and excitement; but the look in her face left no doubt but that she would put her threat into execution, and sullenly, the would-be assassin relaxed his grip and rose to his feet.

Without taking her eyes from Cademon, the girl seized the water jug from the table and dashed the contents in her father's face. Her action had the desired effect.

A long-drawn sigh burst from the purple lips, the eyes returned to their normal position, and in a few seconds the Colonel was once more on his feet facing Cademon.

"It was a treacherous action, but fully in accordance with your past record," he articulated, painfully.

"Shall I call for help, dad?" questioned Olive.

"No, my brave darling. There are reasons which necessitate my letting him go unpunished," her father responded. "Let me rest for a few minutes and we will see him out of the house."

Ten minutes later the three stood at the hall-door.

"You have seen my daughter, Cademon; perhaps even your crime-begotten soul will realise what her answer will be, when I tell her in a fortnight's time," were the parting words of the Colonel.

* * * * *

The remainder of that night Darlington spent on the settee in his study sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion, whilst his daughter kept watch and ward; however, there were no further interruptions.

With the first rays of morning he awoke to a certain extent refreshed and looking but little the worse for his desperate encounter.

Olive was naturally curious as to the meaning of the awful scene she had witnessed, but was too good a daughter to desire to probe into secrets which her father evidently desired to conceal. She had heard what he had said to his assailant and knew that in due course a full explanation would be granted her.

At her father's request she assisted him in removing all traces of their unwelcome visitor, and this was sufficient hint that he did not wish the affair mentioned to anybody.

Shortly before the servants came down, the Colonel completely smashed the pane of glass which Cademon had operated on, and later in the morning let it be understood that he had done so by accident.

Up to now he had been too exhausted to inquire how it was that his daughter had appeared so providentially at the crucial moment of the struggle.

The explanation was simple. Her bedroom was just above the Colonel's study, and she had been awakened by the noise of the falling ladder.

On going to her window she had seen the stream of

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light proceeding from the study, and rather surprised that he should be up so late, and thinking that perhaps he might be ill, she slipped on her dressing-gown and came down.

Hearing voices she was about to return again, but at that moment she heard her father's muffled appeal for help as Cademon sprang at him, and had entered the room with the result we have seen.

Olive was too busy during the next few days to find time for much thought regarding the strange occurrence she had taken such a stirring part in.

It was close on Christmas—always a stirring time at Bracken Hall—because the Colonel entertained a large house-party at that period and the arrangements principally devolved upon her.

This year would be the last she would superintend, for her marriage was to take place a few days after the usual festivities; which fact did not tend to lessen her responsibilities.

Nothing further had been heard of Cademon, and on inquiring at the Red Lion—the village inn—the Colonel learnt that he had departed with his accomplice on the night after his fruitless enterprise.

This did not cause Darlington to relax any of the precautions which he had taken against a repetition of the objectionable incident. Every night before retiring he personally paid a visit to see that the lower doors and windows were properly secured, and invariably made fast the steel shield which had been fitted to the study window.

The main portion of the guests were not to arrive at Bracken Hall till Christmas eve; but it had been arranged that Gerald Standford—the Colonel's future son-in-law—should come three days previously so that he might arrange the final details of the wedding with his coming bride and her father. In due course he put in an appearance, much to Olive's delight.

A tall girl, clad in a white dressing-gown, was facing him.

For several years it had been Olive's custom to assist in the decoration of the village church, and this year she pressed her lover into the service, and on the afternoon of the day previous to Christmas Eve they set forth from Bracken Hall with this intention.

There was every sign that England was likely to enjoy a typically old-fashioned Christmas. Snow was falling softly, gradually covering up all familiar land-marks with a white mantle.

The lovers chatted merrily as they briskly covered the ground. The conversation—which, needless to say was freely interluded with the sweet nothings which are of superlative interest to lovers, but somewhat *caviare* to those who cannot lay claim to the title—turned upon the old church which they were about to decorate. Olive, who was an authority upon its ancient history, spoke of the troublous times which it had seen in days gone by. Tradition claimed that it was one of the oldest buildings in the kingdom. Certainly there were records in existence which established beyond doubt that previous to its being dedicated to the service of Christianity it had served as a fortress, and in that capacity had stood more than one seige.

Even now, with its quaint old battlements it had more the appearance of a mediæval castle than a place of worship. But long ago its dungeons had been turned into crypts and its dried up moat into a churchyard.

When the lovers reached this ancient edifice, they found the cart, which had been sent on from Bracken Hall loaded with holly and evergreens, had already arrived and the material had been placed in the porch.

Several other ladies and gentlemen were also present to assist in the good cause. Very soon trailing ropes of greenery, relieved by the scarlet berries, were being fixed to the grey old pillars and black oak which formed the pews.

All the afternoon the work proceeded with unabated zeal until only the pulpit remained undecorated. By this time it was getting late, and most of the others who had got farther to go than Olive and Gerald, were getting anxious to get home in time to dress for dinner. The result was that the lovers, nothing loth to be left alone, volunteered to put on the finishing touches.

They accompanied the others to the door and saw them set forth on the journey. Then they re-entered the church. They had practically finished when Olive suddenly found that she would not have enough wire. They had already run themselves rather late; but she was anxious to finish so suggested that Gerald should walk to the verger's cottage, which was about five hundred yards away, and get a further supply.

He rather demurred at leaving her alone in the church in the partial darkness, but Olive protested that she was not in the least nervous and finally he went to do her bidding.

He was away about ten minutes as the verger could not lay his hand on the wire, but finally it was found; and having arranged to lock the church door and return

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Gerald examined the path that led to the bridge.

the key as they passed, Gerald reached the church again.

Passing up the main aisle which was very dimly lighted, he saw that Olive was not by the pulpit, but the fact only vaguely alarmed him. Thinking that she was probably in some other part of the building he called her by name in that lowered voice which one instinctively uses in a place of worship. No response came, and now, really alarmed, he called louder. Still no answer. He systematically searched the church from the altar to the front door, but no trace of her was to be found. The thought struck him that possibly she might have been taken suddenly ill, and made her way home alone. But there were two objections to this theory. Firstly, she would certainly have left some intimation of her intention behind; secondly, her nearest way was past the verger's cottage and she would have in all probability called in knowing him to be there.

Gerald examined the path which led to the bridge over the moat by which the church was approached. It will be remembered that snow had been falling during the afternoon, and he thought that if she had left her footmarks might be observable. But a glance told him that there was not much hope of arriving at any conclusion from this, for already his own footmarks were nearly obliterated.

The snow had perceptibly increased in depth during the last twenty minutes. Realising that he could do nothing without help, he ran as hard as he could to the verger's cottage again.

The two men returned together, and the verger thoroughly illuminated the church and assisted Gerald in another search, but still no clue to the missing girl's whereabouts or explanation of her mysterious disappearance was found.

Almost distracted, Gerald made the best of his way back to Bracken Hall.

Colonel Darlington came to the door with the servant, and his first words struck dismay to Gerald's soul.

"'Why hasn't Olive returned with you?"

As clearly as he could the young man explained what had happened.

Aubrey Darlington wasted no time in useless lamentations:

"We must ride back at once, Standford," he exclaimed. "Tell them to saddle horses at once for Mr. Standford and myself; and order one of the grooms to get ready to go to the police-station with a letter."

Whilst his commands were being carried out he sat down and wrote a brief account of the circumstances to the superintendent of police in charge of the district, with instructions to wire it to the outlying stations. He also gave an exact description of Cademon, for he strongly suspected that individual of having some hand in his daughter's disappearance. He bitterly reproached himself for allowing her name to in any way enter the transaction. Remembering that his last words to the man had been an intimation that the whole affair was practically in her hands, he could see what an obvious advantage it would be for Cademon if he had her in his power. If only as a matter of revenge he would know that he could not choose a more fitting way to injure the Colonel than by striking at him through his daughter.

As Colonel Darlington and Standford galloped towards the church as fast as the two best horses in the stable could carry them, the elder man put the younger in possession of the facts connected with Cademon, and they both agreed that whatever steps they took must be started from the place where the poor girl had last been seen.

They stopped at the verger's cottage, and, hearing that he had no news, borrowed a lantern and pushed on.

Once more the church proper was minutely examined but with no result, and then, determined to leave no stone unturned, they made their way to the vaults. Here again it looked as though they were to be baffled. Indeed, they were on the point of re-ascending when suddenly the Colonel gave a low exclamation, and, seizing Gerald's arm, pointed to a part of the wall which looked quite solid.

We say looked advisedly, for, affixed in it, near the ground was a tiny piece of red cloth—Olive's dress that day had been of that colour. Passing the lantern up and down they traced a square outlined patch. It was obvious that one of the massive stones was movable and the assumption was that she had been forcibly dragged

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through this, and the piece of cloth torn from her skirt when the aperture was closed.

Gerald was for sending for tools and tearing it away, but a little reflection convinced Darlington that there must be some simple way of moving the stone with the added advantage that whoever was behind would probably be taken by surprise.

He examined the stone carefully and discovered a depression in the centre. This he pressed on and suddenly the whole block moved. A little further pressure with their feet and the whole stone moved away bodily, opening up the way to a long, narrow passage. They passed through in silence, Darlington placing the lamp beneath his coat.

* * * * *

To explain the incidents in their proper sequence, it is necessary to return to the moment when Olive was left alone in the church.

Her lover's footsteps had scarcely died away in the distance, when she thought she heard a rustling behind her. She turned quickly, but apparently she was quite alone, and smiling at her mistake, she continued decorating the pulpit. Suddenly there was an unmistakable rush of feet and before she could protect herself or cry out, her head was enveloped in a heavy shawl and she was in the arms of a man.

In spite of her desperate struggles, she was dragged towards the steps and then bodily carried down them. She remembered her skirt catching in something, and then her overwrought feelings gave way and she fainted.

When she recovered, she was sitting in a small cell which was evidently below the ground level, from the dampness of its walls. In front of her was a man whom she recognised as the one whom she had prevented from murdering her father.

"I am sorry to have had to bring you to such a place, Miss Darlington," said Cademon, as soon as he noticed she had recovered sufficiently to understand him, "but circumstances rendered it necessary. I may say that the length of your stay here depends entirely upon yourself.

"I must claim your attention for a few moments whilst I put the case clearly before you. Some years ago your father and I set out to rob a fugitive Indian Rajah, who had got into trouble with the British Government, of a certain rope of pearls which we had discovered he had concealed. After incredible hardships to which I, being the weakest, had to succumb, Colonel Darlington succeeded in obtaining the spoil. On his return to Calcutta he received the news that he had come into Bracken Hall, and instantly was seized with a fit of virtue, and refused to sell the pearls as previously agreed, or to give me my share. You will remember my visit to him the other night; well, he informed me that he proposed leaving you to judge whether he should return the pearls to the Rajah, who, by the way, has made his peace with the Government, or sell them for his and my mutual benefit.

"Now, happening to discover a secret entrance to this charming p ace, and learning from the village folk that you were in the habit of coming here to decorate the place every year, it struck me that it offered a fitting opportunity to persuade you as to the advisability of giving an answer to his question in my favour.

"My plans were seemingly upset when I found that your lover accompanied you, but fortune was kind enough to get rid of him as you know. Let me assure you that the chances of your being found here by any searchers are quite hopeless.

"I do not wish to frighten you, but unless you take an oath to advise your father as I wish I shall be compelled to take your life for my own protection.

"I will give you half-an-hour to choose which you will do."

Olive never knew how she got through that half-hour.

She was sitting in a small cell evidently below the ground level, and in front of her was a man.

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She did not waver for a moment in what her decision should be.

Grieved as she was to hear of her father's fall, she saw how anxious he was to repair his false move, and determined that even if her life was to pay the forfeit no word of hers should persuade him against restitution.

At last Cademon rose from his seat—she noticed that he held a revolver in his hand, and shuddered.

"Time is up, Miss Darlington," he said, mechanically. "What is your answer?"

"I cannot do as you wish me," she replied simply.

"Pause and reflect," he answered. "You are young to die."

"I have done so," she said.

He levelled the revolver at her.

"I shall count ten," he said.

She offered a mental prayer up to Heaven, and closed her eyes.

He had counted five. Each figure seemed to strike her funeral knell.

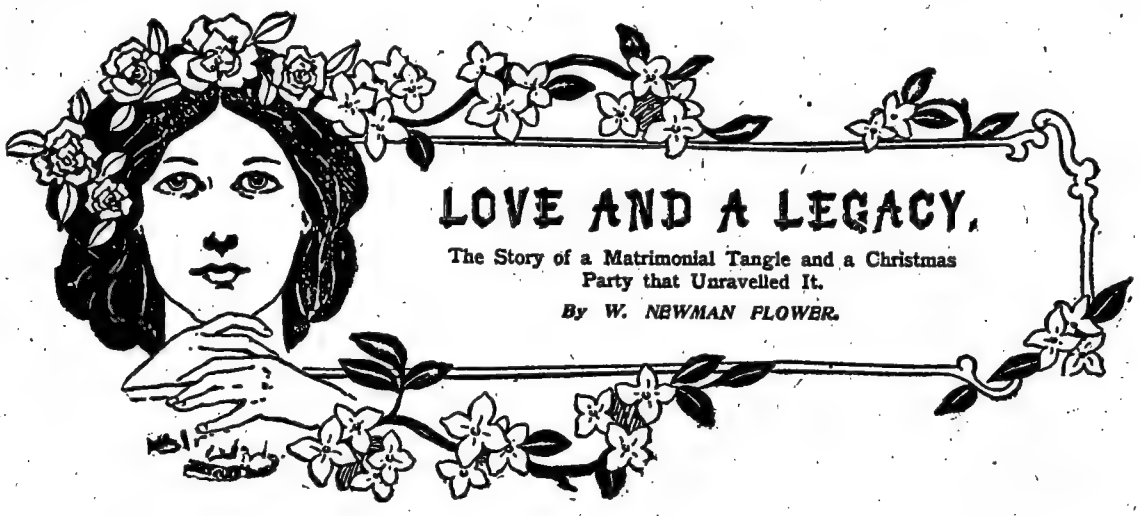
Six! Seven! Eight! Nine! Ten!

There was a flash and a report, but the bullet flew above her head and the voice of her lover broke on her ears.

At the crucial moment the Colonel and Gerald had burst upon the scene just in time to save her. And Gerald had dashed the assassin's arm up.

In the struggle which ensued, Cademon was mortally wounded by his own revolver and he died a few hours after.

Needless to say, the pearls were on their way to the rightful owner when the marriage bells rang out to signalise the marriage of the re-united lovers.



LOVE AND A LEGACY.

The Story of a Matrimonial Tangle and a Christmas Party that Unravelled It.

By W. NEWMAN FLOWER.

It was a chilly December morning, and a stifling pea-soup fogs wept down Fleet Street, irritating the lungs of all who were not fortunate enough to have mufflers over their mouths. Cecil Langdale, editor of the *Comet*, found his already questionable temper fast becoming worse beneath the atmospheric ordeal, and rushing into his office he bounced up the stairs and into the editorial sanctum.

His sub-editor, Charlie Fraser, was leaning against the window smoking a cigarette and looking out at the blocked traffic in the street.

"Beastly weather outside," he remarked, as Langdale entered.

"So it seems," replied his chief, a trifle irritably. "You don't appear to be very busy this morning," he added.

Fraser turned round sharply at this censure.

"I say, old man, you've got the hump. You look as if you were going to be married."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Langdale, filling his pipe thoughtfully and sinking into his chair. "Do you know any reason why I shouldn't be married?"

"None at all. But you're not——"

"No, no. Don't jump at conclusions, and spare your congratulations. All the same, a very curious thing has happened. I've just found out that I had an eccentric bachelor uncle, and that he's dead."

"And has left you some 'tin,' I suppose?" interrupted Fraser.

"Well, yes, but only on one condition, which makes it impossible for the cash to become mine. He always was a miserly old beggar, and I never saw or heard anything of him unless he could beg, borrow, or steal a stamp from someone to write to me with. However, I certainly must give him credit for laying out a penny a week on the *Comet*, and from what I can gather he was an enthusiastic reader."

Fraser walked across the room to an armchair near the fire, and sat down with his hands behind his head.

"This is getting interesting," he said.

"This morning I had a letter from his solicitors," resumed Langdale, "informing me of his death, and saying that he had left me the sum of £300 a year and a thousand pounds down if I would marry—whom do you think?"

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"Give it up."

"Why, the old girl who writes our matrimonial notes under the *nom-de-plume* of 'Mrs. Matchem.' If I refuse, the money goes to the Society for the Preservation of Stray Cats!"

"Then you think the feline race will benefit by the bequest?" inquired the sub-editor.

"Of course. Do you think I'm going to marry—*her!* She must be fifty."

"Probably more," said Fraser consolingly.

"Besides, she may be married already. We send the correspondence to her, and she brings up her copy every week as regularly as clock-work, and her real name is Craig. That's all I know about her. Why, the very idea's too funny for words. Of course I shall raise a protest, or——"

A shrill whistle came at the speaking-tube.

"Who's there?" shouted Langdale.

"'Mrs. Matchem' would like to see you, sir," came the muffled reply from the lower regions.

"Send her up, please," he said, then added to Fraser: "Here she is. Of course I must explain the matter and ask for her assistance."

"In that case I'll leave you. I never have played 'gooseberry' for anyone, and I don't intend to begin it now," replied the sub. caustically, as he swung himself out of his chair and went towards the door. "Good luck, old man, and—keep your pecker up!"

He vanished, and a few seconds later an old lady sailed into the room. Her grey hair was neatly brushed back under her bonnet, and her gold-rimmed spectacles had become dimmed with the fog. Langdale felt a cold shiver run up his spine.

"Good morning," she said affably, as she approached his desk. "Fearful weather, isn't it?"

"Is it? Yes, I believe it is," he replied absent-mindedly. "Will you sit down? You've brought your 'copy,' that's right. Er—if you're not in a hurry to go—I—er—should like to speak to you."

She occupied the chair Fraser had just vacated, and allowed the tips of her boots to rest upon the fender.

"The fact is," continued Langdale with a tremor, "I've got a rather eccentric uncle—at least, he's dead now—and he's left me £300 a year and a thousand pounds down if I marry——"

"How kind. But is this information for our matrimonial page?"

"Yes—that is—no. Pray excuse my asking a pertinent question, but are you married?"

Langdale expected to see her go off into hysterics, but no sign of surprise passed over her face.

"My husband is dead, but I have seven children living," she said.

Langdale groaned.

"The conditions of the will are somewhat peculiar, he went on. "I only receive the money if I marry—pardon me—marry you."

"Me?"

"Yes. 'Mrs. Matchem' who writes our matrimonial notes has been ordained by my idiotic uncle to become my wife. Of course the idea is preposterous. We are scarcely suited to one another, are we? You're so much old—I mean we might lodge an appeal. Now, would you be prepared to see this thing through with me, and if we succeed in getting the money, sharing it without going through the superfluous ordeal of the marriage service?"

"Certainly not."

"Then you mean that I must either marry you or lose the money?"

"If your uncle has made it necessary for you to marry 'Mrs. Matchem' before his bequest becomes yours, why marry her you must. But have you spoken to Mr. Fraser on the subject? I think he could advise you as well as anyone."

"Why do you suggest him?"

"Because it was at his recommendation that this post was given to me. He knows me well."

"Very well. I'll speak to him and let you know. Good morning."

Fraser took his cue from her departure and re-entered the room.

"I suppose I may now look upon you as engaged?" he said with a laugh.

"Don't be an ass!" retorted Langdale. "Look here, I've got into a pretty mess. She won't agree to fight the case out in the courts, and insists on matrimony."

"Then I'm afraid, my dear fellow, you're cornered."

"She told me to talk the matter over with you."

"She did, did she? Well, I don't pretend to be a matrimonial agent because outside interference always ends in quarrelling, but if you'll come down to my place next week and spend Christmas with me, I'll see what I can do for you."

"All right. I'll come."

"And you needn't come alone. Don't forget to bring your sister with you. Girls are always useful in a delicate case of this kind, you know!"

* * * * *

Fraser was waiting on the doorstep to receive them, when Cecil and Mabel Langdale arrived at his suburban villa on Christmas Eve. He took his comrade by the arm, and led him off to change his clothes, for it was snowing fast, and his mother performed a similar duty for Mabel.

"We ought to have a lively time," he said, as he followed Langdale into his room. "'Mrs. Matchem' and two of her daughters are staying with us until after the vacation."

"What?" roared Langdale. "You've asked 'Mrs. Matchem' here?"

"Yes. And why not? I can assure you that the eldest girl, Elsie, is a regular stunner. You'll lose your heart in five minutes—but sorry, old man, I forgot you're no longer fancy free."

"If this is a practical joke you're playing, Charlie, all I can say is that it's rather ill-timed, don't you think so?" said Langdale seriously.

"Oh, dear, no. Christmas with your intended is always the ideal season, is it not?"

He withdrew with a chuckle, and a few minutes later Langdale followed him down into the drawing-room, where mutual introductions ensued. If his treatment of Mrs. Craig was perhaps a trifle chilly, he certainly did not visit the sins of the parents upon the children, for he sat and chatted with her two daughters all the evening, and the following day distinguished himself by monopolising the attention of the elder girl from breakfast till dinner-time.

It was not until he retired to rest that night that the recollection of his position came back to him, and he knew that the £300 a year was quickly slipping from his grasp.

He had fallen in love with Elsie Craig, but to be compelled to marry her mother and acknowledge

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the girl he loved as his step-daughter was absolutely too outrageous, sacrilege almost. What was more, he speedily came to the conclusion that he would not be driven into an obnoxious union, so decided to think no more of the legacy. But his loss was not destined to be altogether forgotten, for in the middle of the night a cat's concert on the greenhouse below his window woke him with a start.

"And to think that I'm robbing myself to preserve such reptiles!" he gasped. And jumping up he threw open the window, and dashed the contents of his water-jug upon his feline serenaders with more than usual zest. Then getting into bed again he soon tumbled off to sleep.

The dawn of Boxing Day brought no change in his resolve, and without telling Fraser of his decision, he followed Elsie into the small sitting-room that adjoined the conservatory when dinner was over.

"There's a rather pretty poem in there on Christmas," she said, laying down a magazine as he took a seat on the ottoman by her side. "That reminds me, Charlie says that you're a real live editor. Is it true?"

"I am one of those unfortunate individuals," he responded, drawing near.

"Why 'unfortunate'? You have only to sit at your desks all day long and decline manuscripts with thanks."

"But we have to write a good deal ourselves."

"That is not work; it's a pleasure."

"How do you know?" he asked inquisitively.

"Because I write a little myself. Fearful nonsense I'm afraid though."

"Do you really? Love stories I suppose?"

"No, matrimonial notes. At least, I contribute a page to a weekly periodical on the subject regularly."

"What!" he cried, starting up. "You're not—who are you?"

"I'm 'Mrs. Matchem' of the *Comet*, and you're my editor. I fear I've kept my secret very badly."

"But I don't understand. Mrs. Craig—who's she?" he asked mystified, and dropping to the ottoman again.

"My mother, of course. But I'd better explain. It was Charlie Fraser who got me the work in the first instance, and we thought you'd think me so young and—and inexperienced to write matrimonial notes, so agreed that mother should take my 'copy' up to the office every week. I'm afraid it was very deceitful, but——"

"What a splendid idea! I knew it couldn't be your mother all the time! Please accept my congratulations on sending in such excellent work, and I hope you'll continue to write for us. Do you know, I think you must have brought about many a happy union through those notes of yours."

"I hope so."

"And since you seem to be so well up in matrimonial matters I'm going to ask you a question myself. I think you might answer it without waiting to put a reply in the paper. Will you be my wife?"

She inclined her head, and he saw the roses flush up in her cheek.

"But you must tell me what I wish to know first," she bargained.

"With pleasure."

"If you marry me do you get £300 a year and a thousand pounds down?"

"Ha! ha! I'm afraid I do! But I had made up my mind to ask you to-night to marry me long before I knew who you really were," he replied.

"I don't mean to infer that you wished to marry me for the sake of the legacy," she said. "Only, strangely enough, a similar bequest becomes mine if I marry you, so if you're greedy I must be accused of greed also."

"A similar bequest?" he repeated.

"Yes, I am a distant relative of your uncle, so I suppose am a cousin—about ten times removed—to you. He knew my secret, and liked my work; indeed, I am conceited enough to say that I was a favourite of his. Nevertheless, I did not expect such a handsome legacy."

"But are we to keep out legacies, or are the cats to have them? It all rests with you, you know."

"I don't think the cats want them very much, do they?" she said naïvely as she turned her head away.

* * * * *

Half-an-hour later, as Langdale went in search of Fraser, he collided with him at the dining-room door.

"Come inside a moment," he said. "Now, I don't know whether to thank you or kick you for the prank you've been playing, but as I've got the girl I'll do the former. Why didn't you tell me in the beginning that Elsie was our real correspondent?"

"Because I wanted some fun, and you can congratulate yourself on having afforded it me. But since I've done you a good turn—if you like to call it so—you must do me one. The fact is I've asked your sister."

"And been 'declined with thanks'?"

"No. To tell the truth, with your consent I'm accepted."

"Girls are always useful in a delicate case like this!" said Langdale, recalling his comrade's remark of a few days previously.

"Except when they've got more important business to attend to!" rejoined the other with a broad smile.

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DON FELIPE'S MASTERPIECE:

OR, THE CHANGED FACE.*

A STORY OF SPAIN. By VICTOR LORENZO WHITECHURCH.

OLD Don Felipe da Castro stood leaning upon his silver-headed cane under the shadow of a pillar in the side aisle of the cathedral of Valencia, listening to the deep-toned Gregorians of the choir, and ever and anon glancing at the crowd of worshippers. It was a Saint's Day, and Mass was being sung at the High Altar. Kneeling, or standing with heads bowed in prayer, was a motley group of men and women, the former radiant in the bright costumes of a couple of centuries ago, the latter draped in those graceful mantillas which still characterise the women of sunny Spain.

Don Felipe da Castro, though short and insignificant in stature, was a man to be marked out of many in a crowd. His was the face of a philosopher and an artist, marked by many a deep and thoughtful line, and sweetened by a smile that every now and then broke out around his little white moustache and pointed beard. His deep-set, mellow, dark eyes were those of one who had studied human nature deeply, who knew its faults as well as its beauties, but who had never given way to that cynicism which so often distinguishes the student of humanity. Kindliness as well as judgment shone forth in every glance of his penetrating eyes.

Advanced as he was in years, he was almost the oldest of the throng of worshippers, and he knew them nearly all. As he stood shrouded in gloom, his mind wandered at times from the priest in his rich vestments to those who knelt and stood around him. He thought of a generation that was not his own, that he was to leave behind him upon the earth, to carry on the work of the comrades of his own time. More especially, and with a touch more of pleasure than regret, did the latter thought strike him as his eyes fell upon a young man standing a few paces in front of him and towards the middle aisle. He watched the handsome, black bearded profile of Juan de Villagarcia as a father looks at his favourite son, or, as in this case, the master artist looks upon his favourite pupil. Juan de Villagarcia was a man of about five-and-twenty, in the heyday of health, vigour, and manly beauty; and more than one were the soft glances that stole in his direction from beneath the dark mantillas, in spite of the watchful care of stern duennas.

Juan de Villagarcia, in his turn, appeared to be not so much engrossed in his worship as a good Catholic should have been. His eyes were steadily directed to a point slightly in front of him. The old man followed his gaze, and an expression of pain shone forth in his face as he found the object that was engrossing his pupil's attention, a beautiful face gazing upward in rapt devotion —the face of a girl who could vie with all others in Valencia and bear off the palm of southern beauty—that of Inez Mercator. Delicate ivory hands held a string of beads, the fingers playing with them listlessly: the kneeling posture was one of grace, and it was small wonder that Juan de Villagarcia's soul was not ascending unto Heaven with the prayers of the priest, but was chained down to earth by the spell of a fair woman.

More heavily still leant Don Felipe upon his cane, and listlessly fell the "*Ite Missa est*" of the deacon upon his ears as he bowed his head in thought. As he raised it, Inez Mercator, accompanied by her duenna, was leaving the cathedral, and he noted the quick glance she shot at Juan de Villagarcia as she passed him, and the deep colour rising in the young man's face.

As Don Felipe da Castro stepped out into the sunshine once more he was greeted with many a graceful raising of the sombrero and a soft "*Buenos dias, señor,*" for everyone knew him. Who was he but the greatest painter their city had ever known, the man who made his portraits live on the canvas? Proud, indeed, was the family in Valencia, or even in Seville and Madrid, a member of which had been painted by "*el gran maestro,*" and the gentle hearts of many of his fellow townsmen ached with sorrow as they beheld their beloved artist beginning to totter towards the unknown "mañana" that awaits us all.

Courteous and dignified, the old painter returned the salutations of his fellow citizens, but with less of a smile than usual, nor stayed he to talk with any, but walked back thoughtfully to his house, entered his studio, and threw himself down upon a chair.

He might have been seated thus for half-an-hour or more, when the door of the studio was thrown open and Juan de Villagarcia himself entered the room.

"Good morning, Señor," he said.

"Ah, Juan, is that you?" replied the master. "I had almost forgotten that you were to have a lesson this morning."

"And in truth, my master, I should not have been altogether sorry not to have had one, for it happens that I am in a lazy mood to-day."

"Those who are destined for great things must never be lazy," said the old painter gravely, "and I like not to hear such words."

The young man stood somewhat abashed before this rebuke.

"I meant nothing," he said, "only one does not always feel inclined to work. Besides," he added with a charming compliment, "one never thinks of one's own possible greatness in the presence of Don Felipe da Castro. All that is greatest is his alone."

"Ah, Juan, you should remember I have reached an age when compliments fall flat. Also, I would ask you, does the presence of Don Felipe inspire you with laziness? If, indeed, I am as worthy as you say, it should rather inspire you to emulate such greatness, to make it your own after—after——"

* Such a picture as that described really exists. It is in a house in Scotland. The painter is unknown.—V. L. W.

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A beautiful face gazing upward in rapt devotion.

"After what?" asked the young man anxiously.

In answer the painter rose from from his chair and placed his hand on the other's shoulder.

"My son," he said softly, "it cannot be so very long before my brush and palette will have to be resigned, before I, myself, take my journey hence, before——"

"Stop, stop, my master!" cried the young man passionately. "I will not hear you say such things. We cannot lose you."

"Listen to me, Juan," replied the old man. "Listen, and be calm. Do you not see that my greatest consolation would be to know that my work will be carried on? Do you not see the hopes I have placed in you, my son?"

"What—what do you mean?"

"Do you think that I have had no object in teaching you my art? Oh, Juan, it has been my joy to think that you will one day follow in your master's footsteps! I know it is somewhat selfish, but I have loved my work; and I loathe to leave it without the thought that you, my best beloved disciple, will take it up after me."

"Oh, my master—it is too much—I am not worthy—I know so little."

"As yet, Juan. But you have in you the making of a great artist. It will rest with yourself, with your own faithfulness and courage, to make your name great. Confess now. You love your art?"

"Yes, yes. You know I do."

"Then why is it, Juan, that of late your energies have fallen back, that your touch has lost in power and your eye in discernment. I have noted your lack of enthusiasm. Why is it?"

The young man looked in wonder at his master.

"I did not know," he stammered, but the other interrupted him.

"Juan de Villagarcia, I will show you why. You say you love your art, but that is not the only object of your affections. Behold!"

And, striding forward towards an easel upon which was a picture covered with a cloth, the old painter snatched away the covering, and there stood the beautiful face of Inez Mercator.

"You think me a wizard?" said the painter, with a smile at Juan's astonished face. "But no, it is very simple. I have been painting her portrait, and this is a study I made for my own use. The rest is palpable. I have not been a student of human nature all these years without being able to tell when a young man is in love. I could not see you both at Mass this morning without your secret being revealed to me."

The young man blushed violently for a moment, and then said:

"And if you have guessed my secret, I am not ashamed of it. What then?"

"You have made a great mistake. Nay, be not angry with me, but hear what I have to say. Donna Inez is not the helpmate for the rising young master, Juan de Villagarcia."

"Señor, señor, you know her not."

"It is because I know her, my son, that I say so. Do you think I have painted God's image for nigh on three-score years without being able to discern the evils that so often mar that image? Do you think I cannot see the mind—the very soul—beneath each face I study? You need someone who will prove more than faithful to you, faithful to your life's work. Inez Mercator will not prove such."

"It is only from you, my master, that I would hear such words. But they are false."

"They are true. It is because I love you, because I wish to see you great, that I say resign this woman for ever!"

"Señor!"

"Yes, I mean it. Choose not only between her and fame, but between her and faithfulness. She has a beautiful face! Yes. But I know the soul beneath."

The young man drew himself up, his nostrils quivering with indignation, his lips white with restrained passion, and said:

"Don Felipe da Castro, your age and my love for you make me calm. But listen. I love my work, and I love Inez Mercator, and I will be faithful to both. Yes! I take the high destiny that you have marked out for me, and from this day you shall never have cause to reproach me for idleness, nor shall you say that art suffers from

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love. I do not say that I can ever equal you, but I swear I will follow you. And I swear, also, my master, that I will marry the woman I love, nor shall you, or any other man, come between us."

Don Felipe listened gravely and then said:

"Enough, my son. I take your promise to me. As for the other I have warned you——"

"Say no more——."

"I will not. There is no reason in the prison of love, Juan."

And the two settled to their work. When, after the lesson was over, the young man was about to depart, he turned once to the portrait of Inez Mercator and gazed at it fervently.

"Senor," he said, "may I ask you a great favour?"

"What is it, Juan?"

"That you will give me that picture."

Don Felipe da Castro hesitated for a moment before he answered. Then he said:

"No, I will not give you that picture. It is a mere study—it does not represent her as she is."

"Oh, it is perfection!"

The old man smiled.

"You have much to learn in art and human nature, yet. There is something wanting in that picture that perhaps it is as well you should never know. But, if I am to give you a faithful portrait, I must supply it."

"Oh joy! you will finish it?"

"No. But I will present you with a portrait of Inez Mercator in good time."

When the young man had departed, Don Felipe remained standing, with eyes fixed upon the portrait. Then he shook his head sadly, and turned away with a sigh.

"Alas," he said, "that when beauty is but skin deep, the instinct of man will probe no deeper!"

* * * * * * *

Nearly a year had elapsed. Don Felipe da Castro had grown feebler still, and leant more heavily upon his cane as he left his house one morning, followed by a servant bearing a package, and wended his way slowly towards the house of his favourite pupil.

With a stifled moan Guadara fell backwards.

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Juan de Villagarcia received him with much affection; as soon as the old man was seated he asked for an easel to be brought into the room, and bade his servant unwrap the package. Having dismissed him, he placed upon the easel a portrait of Inez Mercator.

"I have kept my promise, my son," he said, as soon as the young man had ended his profusion of thanks. "It is your wedding day to-morrow, and I have brought you a gift for it."

"Why, is it not the same portrait that I saw in your studio, Senor?"

"No, Juan, it may seem to you the same, but it is not. Listen, and do not be angry. As long as you love your wife and believe her to be worthy of your love, you will not see the difference; but if you once have cause to doubt or hate her—"

"Señor!"

"*If*, I say. I pray it may never be so; then, look at that picture, and remember the warning of Felipe da Castro. And now, farewell, my son, and forget not your work. As for this picture, it is the last, perchance, that I shall paint. And it may be, it is my best."

When the master was gone the pupil looked long and earnestly at the picture. Then he murmured:

"Ah, beloved! thou art all perfection. There is naught but love, and beauty, and faithfulness in thy face! Some silly phantom of the mind hath bewitched Don Felipe, but he has not reproduced it here!"

And he set his lips to the cold canvas and kissed the picture of his betrothed.

Gay was the scene in the Cathedral on the morrow; and yet there were tears in the eyes of one who watched the bridal pair bow beneath the benediction of the priest. Poor Don Felipe da Castro. Scarce two months passed, and that gay scene had changed into one of mourning as the solemn Mass for the Dead was chanted, and a coffin surrounded by blazing torches stood in the aisle, and was afterwards lowered into a spot close to where he had so often stood to worship. The great master was dead!

One man, who remained long after the crowd of citizens had softly passed out, one man, down whose cheeks the tears were running fast, despite the fact that he had only just obtained man's greatest earthly treasure—the woman whom he loved for his wife—knelt down beside the grave and prayed to God to make him worthy of the master who was no more, to help him to carry out that master's wish in his own work.

* * * * *

Five years had passed, and already Valencia was beginning to realise that the mantle of the prophet had fallen upon his disciple. Long and earnestly had Juan de Villagarcia toiled in the stony paths of art, and now his fame as a portrait painter was beginning to go forth among men. He had sacrificed much to carry out his master's wish, for it was entirely his own ambition that had urged his course onward.

But, if he was wrapped up in his work, there was one, at least, that did not interest herself so much in it. He had never thoughtlessly neglected his wife; he had never doubted her interest in him or her faithfulness for a moment. It was she who was to blame. She hated the constant devotion to work that her husband evinced. It bored her, the painting of all these pictures, the hours spent in the studio. Besides, it was not *her* business. A man must work, but a woman must amuse herself. And she did. Juan did not notice it. Had his been a less exalted nature, he would have experienced the need of her help in buoying him up to his work; but he was so strong, so enduring, so striving in his character, that he did not see his wife's careless attitude because he did not need her attentive one. He laboured in his studio, he gave her his spare hours. And he was happy. Alas, that he was so blind; alas, that he did not notice how she was beginning to spend her spare hours. If a woman will amuse herself, there are always men to be found to amuse her.

Late one afternoon he was standing in his studio before an unfinished picture, studying a mass of drapery arranged on a lay figure, and murmuring:

"Ah, Inez would be able to give me the correct pose. I will send for her."

He clapped his hands and a servant appeared.

"Tell the Señora I wish to see her at once."

The servant bowed and departed. He was a long time gone, and Juan began to grow impatient. When he returned it was with a pale, scared face.

"The Señora is not here."

"Not here?"

"She has gone away. Her maid says she left the house early this morning."

"Well?"

"They say she has gone with the Marquis of Guadara."

"What?"

"Señor, she left this note; they have just found it."

"Give it me. Ha! Leave the room, Carlos."

He tore open the letter and read it. Dazed and staggered, he clasped his hands upon his brow and fell on his knees.

"*Ten lisiurica, Dios!* Have mercy, oh, God!" he groaned.

In his agony of grief he remained for ten minutes or more. Then he rose to his feet and tottered to the other side of the studio where a portrait hung in the light, the portrait that Don Felipe da Castro had painted for him. In anguish he raised his eyes to the beautiful face, exclaiming:

"Inez! Inez! It cannot be true. Art thou not mine own beloved wife? Speak, and tell me thou hast not proved false—that it is all a mocking dream. Inez—if it *is* so—Heaven, if it is so—I have never doubted thee for a moment until now—oh, God—what is this?"

Gazing as he was upon the picture, he suddenly started back in horror, his face blanched, his eyes protruding. For as he looked upon the outline of those lovely features there slowly grew, as it were beneath and mingled with the face before him, a vision of another face so absolutely hideous that a feeling of loathsomeness crept upon his soul. Long and steadily as he gazed upon the picture, so did the awful face beneath the surface-beauty of the woman grow upon him until all loveliness had vanished from the portrait, and he saw only the *soul*—the dread, realistic soul—that dwelt beneath supreme.

It was the masterpiece of Don Felipe da Castro!

The wretched painter, on fire with grief and distraction, exclaimed:

"Oh, my master, my master, thou wert right! I see it all now. Fool, fool that I have been. Thou hadst eyes to probe where my folly could not penetrate, and thou hast painted the living soul of her I thought I loved. Thy meaning now is clear; that until I looked thereon with doubt or hatred I should never know. Oh, master, master, forgive me!"

He pointed a quivering arm at the picture.

"I see thee, Inez," he cried. "I see thee as thou art! I see thee as thou art!"

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The stern implacable lesson of the man who was a master of his art and a master of the human soul besides was entering his mind. The hideous reality that the master had seen when he gazed upon that fair young face had been faithfully reproduced as he had seen it, and doubt had at length drawn it forth for another to see, and that other was Juan de Villagarcia, her husband!

"Oh, Juan! Juan! it is myself; have mercy!"

For a quarter of an hour he wrestled with the dread demons that surrounded him. Then, buckling on his rapier, he bounded into the courtyard and cried for his horse. Once more he was a man of action. The pursuit had commenced.

* * * * *

He found by inquiries they had started for Madrid on the Cuenca road. League after league he rode, gathering fresh traces of them. He had taken much money with him, and was able to obtain fresh horses. He rode all night. In the morning he drew up at a roadside *posada*, and found he was only an hour behind. There had been a breakdown. The Marquis de Guadara's carriage had been upset, the horses injured, and after much delay he and his companion had been obliged to proceed on a single horse, the only one obtainable, she riding with him in true Spanish fashion.

He spurred on. A pistol bullet came whizzing from behind a tree as he rode through a wood. One of the Marquis' retainers, doubtless, but he heeded it not. At length he saw them on their sorry steed, preparing to cross a ford of the Cabriel. They saw him, too, as he came plunging along like a demon. The woman gave a shriek, jumped from the horse, and buried her face in the long green grass beside the river. De Guadara dismounted also, drew his sword, and waited.

But not for long. Springing from his steed as he rode up, de Villagarcia rushed upon him, and their blades crossed with a clash. It was no match of the fencing room, and they were at it at once—fighting for the life of one of them.

The red blood spurted from de Villagarcia's arm as a thrust from the other's blade caught him under his guard. But it only made him more savage. Suddenly changing his ground, he forced the Marquis back with a furious rush until there was only a yard between him and the river. A quick feint, a lightning thrust, and the keen blade drew heart-blood, and with a stifled moan de Guadara fell backwards and was whirled away by the stream.

His slayer turned upon the trembling woman and grasped her by the arm. She shivered with fright, for the reeking sword was still in his other hand.

"Are you going to kill me, Juan?" she asked.

He laughed with scorn. That was all the reply he vouchsafed.

Then he changed the saddle of the steed he had overtaken to his own, placed her thereon, mounted himself, and the keeper of the *posada*, shrewd man that he was, asked no questions when he saw them both return together, for there was something in the man's face that prevented him.

They returned to Valencia. He never left her for a moment. As soon as he could he hired a carriage, sat in it by her side, but spoke no word.

At length they reached the house. Curious servants pried through peep-holes as they entered. But still he never spoke a word.

Dazed, affrighted, worn out with travel, sleeplessness and agony, the fair woman who had used him so ill was dragged into his studio, and forced into a chair before her own portrait.

And then he found his tongue.

"I am going to show you what you are," he said. "I am going to show you as you appear to me now, to make you understand why I hate you and despise you a thousand times more than ever I loved you, why I love you no longer. I am going to make you see yourself, and hate yourself. Listen!"

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And then he told her, slowly and deliberately, how Don Felipe da Castro had warned him years before concerning her, told her the story of the picture, told her how the picture had at length revealed to him the truth.

"And see," he cried, "the soul of you that lies beneath that transient beauty. Watch! I will trace its features."

Her gaze fixed with horror on the picture. At length she too saw what the master had portrayed. Falling down on her knees she shrieked:

"Oh, Juan! Juan! it is myself; I feel it now. I see the baneful lines. Juan, have mercy—don't—don't kill me! I am not fit to die!"

"Fit to die or fit to live," he cried with flashing eyes. "I care not. I only know I shall hate you for evermore. As you value your worthless life, do not leave this room."

He rushed from the room for a moment or two, and then returned with a glass of wine, which he placed on a table.

"That is poison," he said. "You have your life in your own hands. When I return I care not whether I find a corpse, or whether you have gone. I do not wish to find you here alive. You understand!"

People turned to notice the terrible look upon his face as he walked towards the old Cathedral. A priest within watched him kneel before the tomb of the master painter. The same priest returning an hour afterwards found him still there, praying earnestly.

Presently he rose and walked back to his home, with the air of a man dazed and lost to the world. Slowly he entered his studio and gazed around in the fading light.

It was empty! and the glass of wine still stood upon the table where he had left it, untouched.

He took it up, laughed softly to himself, and murmured:

"So she was afraid! Ha! ha! I thought it would be so."

He raised the glass to his lips and then paused.

"No," he soliloquised, "I don't think *he* would have said so. He would have called me a coward. . . . It is hardest *not* to do it. . . . I will *not* be a coward!"

Then he dashed the contents of the glass full in the face of Don Felipe da Castro's picture and turned on his heel.

* * * * *

"You've been in Spain, old chap," said Dick Harris to the friend who was with him. "Now I want you to have a look at a picture I picked up in Tarragon four or five years ago. It's in my study, so let's go there."

In a moment or two the two men were standing before a portrait of a beautiful girl.

"What a lovely face, Harris! Why, it's a perfect masterpiece!"

"It is, indeed, as I'll show you in a minute. Now, I bought that picture at an old lumber shop. No one knew anything about it, but I took a fancy to the thing, and didn't care who painted it. About a year ago I discovered something unnatural about it."

"What?"

"Well, it fell on my head, nail came out or something, and I turned upon it in a temper—you'll think me a fool—and swore at it. Then, suddenly, I saw a hidden face glaring at me beneath the beautiful one, and the strange thing is, that whenever I've looked at it since, I've only seen that hideous face—it's quite shut out the other. Can you see it?"

"No. You've hit on some curious hallucination."

"I haven't. See, I'll trace the outline—so. . . . Do you see it now?"

"Great Heavens, yes—how terrible! Stop a bit, Harris, I've seen that woman's face before!"

"Where?"

"Ah, I remember now. In a monastery near Valencia; it was a painting of Judas Iscariot, and I've often wondered why the face was that of a woman's more than a man's."

"Who did it?"

"A monk, they told me—about a couple of hundred years ago. He had been a pupil of the great painter da Castro."

"H'm! Wonder if he painted this ghastly thing to warn anybody. Let's come back and have a glass of wine. It's enough to give anybody the shudders!"

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DEAD TO THE WORLD.

By Henry T. Johnson.

Author of "Cruce Vincit," "The Pride of the Ring," etc., etc.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Settling Accounts.

The blow had fallen, the blow that Morgan Chandler had been apprehending ever since he set eyes upon his present master. Before then he had imagined that he had so "arranged matters" in the books that no one who had not spent years on the accounts and on the estate could lay a finger on one false figure.

But he had to meet a different type of man to what he had anticipated. A man with a brain so strong and clear that no figures seemed too big or complex for it to grapple with, none too small for him to spot them, pick them out, and sort them. And at last the long threatened ordeal had arrived, and it had actually arrived in the most truculent fashion. One evening Ned Fletcher, after a knock at the door that in itself had seemed imperative and insolent, had burst in and blurted out:

"You're to attend the Squire in the library, Mr. Chandler, and to take the balance-sheet, the profit and loss account, and the books and vouchers."

"What do you mean, blundering into my office in that fashion!" he shouted angrily, stung beyond endurance by the very look in the face of the man he hated; the man he had not long ago turned out of employment, out of his very house and home, and the man whose every look told that he had not forgotten!

"What do *I* mean?" asked Fletcher defiantly.

"What I want to know is what do *you* mean?"

"Don't argue with *me*."

"And don't try to browbeat *me!* The day's gone for that, Mr. Chandler."

"You insolent vagabond!"

"No names, you're not master here now. My master's your master, and we're man to man."

"Yes, we're man to man, but we're face to face. You can't strike me from behind now," and, as often happens, rage let loose, hurled the bolt of suspicion discretion would have kept back.

"What do you mean, blame me! If thee says I ever hit thee or any other man from behind I'll strike thee face to face."

White and quivering with passion, Morgan Chandler made a blow at the other and in a moment was tripped up and sent sprawling by a neat twist that in earlier days had sent many a keeper and night watcher to grass. An oath escaped Morgan Chandler. From the end of the corridor came an imperious voice:

"What's all this clamour? What are you two men doing here quarrelling, brawling, actually fighting in my house? Confound you! If you don't both desist I'll pitch the pair of you down the stairs," and, meaning what he said, their master strode along and stood between them.

"Silence!" he shouted as each started to urge his own case. "Fletcher, get about your business, and you, Chandler, pick up those books and follow me."

Both men obeyed, Chandler, vaguely grasping at any straw which might save him, on entering the library broke out into a tirade.

"I'll not stop here to be insulted by a lout dragged off the land, to be struck in the face by the very man that I believe had a hand in trying to murder me the other night."

"Very well, my friend, it's a free country—for those who are at large! When do you want to leave?"

"This week—this very day, this very hour, now, this minute!"

"No, no! Not one minute before we've gone through your accounts."

The other in desperation strove to bluster.

"Drop that!" said his master, sternly though quietly, and closing the door he turned the key. "Sit down there," he said, and the other obeyed, though he would have given worlds for the will power to have mutinied.

Then ensued for Morgan Chandler a desperately bad quarter of an hour. Deliberately, methodically, pitilessly, the man seated at the library table went through the accounts before him, placing an unerring finger on item after item that the unjust steward had falsified.

"That is a lie! That is ten pounds less than you received! This account has been paid! The man holds your receipt, don't tell me he's forged it! He's got his cheque with your own indorsement on it, passed through your bank and his own, I've seen the entry in his pass book. You paid on this date forty-two pounds, not fifty-nine! This woman's executors demand to be refunded three quarters' rent, the receipts for which they found among the dead woman's papers."

And so on, and so on. And Morgan Chandler sat there, his heart sinking within him, hearing count after count of the indictment that perchance might mean the broad arrow and the chain gang. At first, feebly arguing and protesting, but at last, listening sullenly, despairingly.

Then his accuser closed the last book and looked him in the face, and so doing hurled like a blow at him one word:

"Thief!"

"But, Squire," the man said at last, the appeal broke from his tongue parched with terror, "you won't put me away, you'll have mercy?"

"What mercy had you on the poor devils you've sold up, lock, stock, and barrel, and turned on the road before—I came back?"

"But, Squire, I did one thing. I tried to save your life—that night I followed the robbers into your room."

"Liar!"

Another word hurled in the man's face made him blink.

"You went into that room intent on murdering me."

A paroxysm of abject terror seized Morgan Chandler. There was something terrible, something suggestive of black magic about this man, who seemed to know everything, who seemed to lay bare Chandler's brain and soul.

"Mercy, mercy, Squire—"

"Squire—Squire!"

There was a loud knocking at the door, and, the Squire unlocking it, Ned Fletcher burst into the room, quivering with excitement.

"They've caught 'em."

"Caught whom?"

"The murderers; the men who broke into Dalehurst Grange and killed John Barker."

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"What on earth are you talking about?" Then exclaiming to Chandler: "Wait here one moment," he left the library, following Ned Fletcher out into the hall.

"What—what will I do? What will he do?" soliloquised Morgan Chandler. "Will he charge me? Shall I be dragged through the village to the lock-up, charged before the justices, and sent to take my trial? Oh! how the folks that hate me, and that's most that I know, will rejoice! Shall I make a bolt for it now? No, I haven't the strength nor the heart."

His eyes fell on an open trunk bearing the label of the line by whose vessel Cyril Roylance had returned to England, and the big R. in black letters. Oh! since such things as shipwrecks were, why hadn't that ship of all others been wrecked, sunk with all on board? It was open. Merely to detach his mind from the agony of suspense that was racking it, he walked across the room and looked into the open trunk, crammed with a varied collection, mostly books and papers, toilet incidentals, a cap or two, one with a cricket badge, athletic and other club rules and registers, and other miscellaneous articles. There was a copy of the "Sydney Bulletin," with red ink crosses marking one picture. His eye catching those crosses, he read the underline, "The Banderville Cricket Team who have just completed their successful Tour," and in smaller type under the figures in the front line and above those in the rear of the group were printed their names.

"Mr. Cyril Roylance." Why, the printer had made a mistake! That wasn't the Squire, and mechanically his eye roved over the group in quest of him. But in a vain quest! What on earth did it mean? There it was, in black and white in print, which was regarded in Morgan Chandler's mind with a considerable amount of reverence. It wasn't a bit like him! With a stealthy glance at the door he turned over the miscellaneous collection, which, as a matter of fact, the Squire had that morning unlocked with a view to assorting and partly destroying. What was this? A pack of cards; no, photographs. He scanned them; mostly of young fellows, many in cricket and cycling costume, one or two pictures of actresses, another, cabinet size, of that group in the "Sydney Bulletin," and one carte de visite of the very man labelled in the newspaper Mr. Cyril Roylance.

And diagonally across the right-hand corner was writing. With an exclamation of amazement, of bewilderment, of exultation, Morgan Chandler read aloud, "*Yours faithfully, Cyril Roylance.*" And at that moment the Squire, with a strange, unsettled look in his face and eyes, the look of a hunted savage animal, entered the room, relocking the door.

The news he had heard had for the moment banished Morgan Chandler from his mind. Catching sight of him he snarled:

"Ah, yes, there's you to deal with, I'd forgotten you. Look here, my friend Morgan Chandler, I'll give you just this chance, get from here as fast as your legs can carry you, and, unless I have within twenty-four hours a wire from you that you're one hundred miles away, I'll place these in the hands of the police and——"

He paused significantly.

And the other man, with a change of demeanour, his thumbs in the arm-holes of his waistcoat, echoed as insolently as possible:

"And?"

"What's your game, my friend?"

"That's my business. Shall I tell you what your game is? It's bluff."

"You scoundrel, what do you mean?"

"What do I mean? I mean scoundrel yourself! It's

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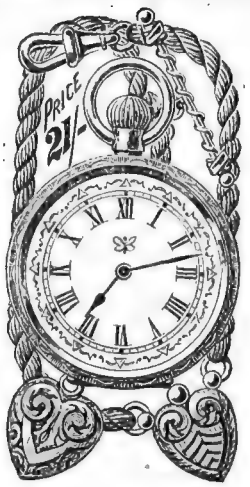

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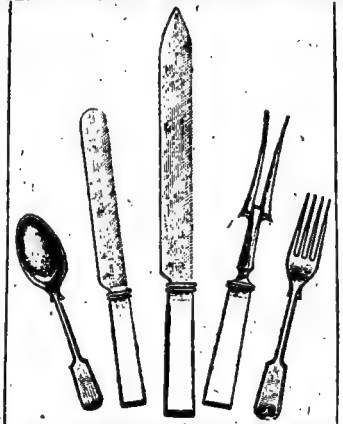

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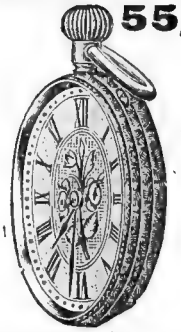

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bluff I say, but I've seen your cards and they ain't good enough, for there's one worth all your hand!"

And he held out for a moment the carte de visite signed by Cyril Roylance.

"No, you don't!" he exclaimed, snatching it away as the other made a dash for it.

In another moment Dick Seldon, like the tiger whose name he had won, sprang at him, but Chandler, avoiding the encounter, darted behind the desk, snatched up a letterweight, and hurled it full at the other. It struck him in the forehead, and in an instant the blood came raining down.

"Curse you! I'll lay you out. You shan't leave this room alive!"

And, knowing that his antagonist meant what he said, Chandler flew from desk to table, dodging the man who chased him, and from the table he snatched up a reading lamp, hurling that, too, at the face, the cruel face, all the more terrible because of the blood streaks lining it, of the man springing upon him.

But this time that man ducked, and the lamp went hurtling across the room, shattering against the embrasure of the windows and falling like a flaming ball, setting the lace curtains in a blaze.

"Help—help!" shouted Chandler, making one more dash, this time for the door.

But Tiger Dick was upon him, had clutched him by the throat and laced his fingers behind his neck, and was closing his thumbs upon his wind-pipe. For a moment they wrestled, then Morgan Chandler went down limp, helpless, whimpering, gasping. And the other knelt upon him.

"You've asked for it, you shall have it!" he said.

And the red mist was in his eyes, the red mist filled his brain and soul, murderer by instinct and by trade, he did his wicked work then and there.

Then he rose up, more like fiend incarnate than man, looked at his hands, they, too, were crimson now, crimson once again, looked with awful dilating eyes at what was lying at his feet; then, turning away, he glanced around him. Why, everything was crimson now, crimson flame!

CHAPTER XXVII.

The End of All.

Ned Fletcher, dispatched post haste from the Hall to the village to bring back the latest and most authentic news, trudged along dutifully, wondering why the Squire should have been so agitated by the intelligence that the detective from London had arrested those two brothers Nubbley and charged them with the murder at Dalehurst Grange, and of the strange rat cure for rheumatism effected by the zealous officer, together with the simultaneous falling off of hair.

"And him generally as cool as a cucumber, never startled by anything, but then, of course, 'twould come all the more home to him, seeing as how they went for him too, not as I can understand that there Chandler having the pluck to follow 'em up, or them clearin' out after sending him to sleep, unless as 'ow he hollered. Hullo! who's that yonder movin' among the bushes?"

He started at a jog trot across the parkland grass, heavy with the night dews.

"Who be you, and what be you doin' here?" he challenged.

"Mind your own business."

"'Tis my business. I've a right to know, and I mean to know."

"But I shan't tell you."

"Won't you. Then I'll take you to those as'll make you."

Dashing over and through a series of clumps of gorse and bracken, he sprang after the figure, now outlined against the grass land gleaming in the night, closed with it, tried the twist which had proved so efficacious in the case of Chandler. This time that back heel failed to come off, and Ned himself went heavily to earth, and his

Thought She was Dying!

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To a Bolton Journal reporter who investigated the case, Mrs. Hodgson said: "I have worked as a weaver in Bolton mills since I was thirteen. Ten years ago while on a visit to Carlisle—my native place—I had an awful attack of rheumatic fever, and for a long time I was so weak that I could not lift a teaspoon to my mouth. The fever left me with shortness of breath, heart-weakness, my legs and hands were very much swollen, and I could not put my feet to the ground. Later on I was removed to Carlisle Infirmary, and nobody expected me to come out alive.

Some time afterwards I asked if I could leave, and I was told I might as well, as I should never be any better. At the end of seven weeks I was taken out of

the Infirmary, and went to Cote Hill, near Carlisle, but even after that I was very ill. I came back to Bolton, and last August I got a little better and tried to do a bit of work at Messrs. Tristram's mill. It was no use, however, as I became so ill that two weavers had to take me home. They thought I was dying on the way. I really felt myself that I was done for!

I became an out-patient at the Bolton Infirmary, but I did not get better, and I kept lingering on as it were between life and death. I dreaded nights coming. I could not eat, I was always short of breath, and work was quite out of the question.

One day I took a few of Chas. Forde's Bile Beans, and next morning I felt a great change. I was able to walk about and wash-up, and I felt quite refreshed, as for the first time for a long while I had been able to sleep at night. At the week-end I got two boxes of Beans at Waller and Riley's Blackburn Road shop. I continued to take them until, after a comparatively short time, I felt thoroughly fit for work. All the people about were thoroughly amazed at the change in me.

Now I have entirely got rid of my old complaints, and feel as well as ever I did in my life. I can eat anything, sleep well, go up and down stairs without the slightest difficulty, and am weaving from morning till night, as I did before I had rheumatic fever."

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adversary was making off when, across the pasture land, a group of men came hastening up. One of them turned the flash of a bull's eye full on the features of Jack Branscombe.

"Surrender!" cried a voice. And another, more familiar as well as more welcome to Jack Branscombe, shouted:

"Yes, Jack, surrender. It's all right now!"

And Jack Branscombe, walking up to the man who held the bulls-eye, said, folding his arms:

"Yes, here I am, what do you want with me?"

"Well, that's a matter to be decided later," said Inspector Rossiter. "Mr. Branscombe, it is my duty to arrest you."

"But you'll come with us quietly, won't you?" said Gerald Hastie, "you'll promise me, won't you, Jack?"

"I'll give you my word, Gerry," Branscombe replied, and the other exclaimed:

"There you are, Rossiter, I'll be answerable for him. He'll come with us, and we needn't turn back on our errand or be hampered in it."

"Seize that man," came another voice out of the darkness, and Ned Fletcher, hastening up, exclaimed: "Who are you all? Why, it's Mr. Rossiter, the very man the Squire sent me to see."

"Yes, Fletcher, I'm going to see the Squire."

"But where's the man who threw me just now? Why, here he is, and it's Mr. Branscombe. Oh! no wonder I met with a fall. But what's this mean? Aren't you going to make sure of him?"

"Shall I slip these on him, Mr. Rossiter," inquired the now deferential Bingle.

"No thanks," said the Inspector, "leave this matter in my hands. Not, however," he chuckled, "that I'm infallible, but there's no crusted port working the oracle this time, Bingle."

And his rural colleague, peace having been restored, replied:

"No, sir, nor yet none of that there Hollands. I shall never look a square-faced bottle in the face again."

"Your master's at home, then?" said the Inspector, turning to Ned, who trudging at Jack Branscombe's heels, determined he should not misuse the liberty so mysteriously given him, replied:

"Yes, sir."

"Then I'll give him a call," and, looking up at the speaker, Ned found himself walking alongside a man whose shoulders towered above his own head, and who went on:

"So that's Fallowfield Hall, the home that Cyril Roylance thought he'd never reach. How red those windows in the centre gleam?"

"By Jove! they do!" exclaimed Jack Branscombe. "And look, there's smoke and a tongue of flame breaking through one of them. They're not gleaming with light, but fire. Come along!"

And the whole party, quickening their footsteps, ran at full speed towards the terrace, and reaching the house they found the few servants on duty, tearing to and fro, setting the hydrants and hose to work.

It was the Oak Room, so called from its panelling, that was on fire, the room appropriated by the Squire as his own private study, and the old carved panelling, black and glistening with centuries, had caught like tinder and was blazing so fiercely that they had in vain tried to get along the corridors leading to the door. And, shuddering with horror, they whispered to each other that the Squire was in there.

Without a moment's loss of time willing hands placed ladders against the windows. Ned Fletcher, faithful and loyal to the man who had given him a chance, and meaning to give him this time one in return, dashed up the rungs, but, half-choked and blinded with smoke and scorched by the volcanic fury roaring from the windows, he was forced back, baffled and beaten by the rampant fire king. All hands were working with a will, Rossiter and those with him as vigorously as any.

"By Jove!" he shouted through the din, "I came out to take him, and I want to take him alive."

"Keep your eye on Branscombe," said Bingle, "mind he doesn't slip," but, turning, he saw the man of whom he had spoken stripped to the waist, clambering, hose in hand, up the ladder, fighting the fire-fiend face to face. And his next words were: "Mr. Hastie, you're right and I'm wrong, and I beg that man's pardon."

Ned Fletcher, darting up that ladder till he stood beside Jack Branscombe, said, too:

"I've done you wrong, sir, I've thought wrong o' you."

"Never mind that," shouted Jack excitedly, "what we've got to do now is to save your master if we can."

"We can't this way, sir," groaned Ned despairingly; then, suddenly, "but I think I know another way. Come along o' me, sir."

They slid down the ladder, together reached a door in the east wing leading to the offices, dashed into the now smoke-filled house, groped their way along galleries, staircases, corridors. At last they reached a room in the same corridor as the Oak Chamber, but on the opposite side. Wrapping around their heads, faces, and hands clothes saturated with water, they flung open one door, dashed pell mell across the corridor, seized the red hot handle of the other. The door was locked!

"Now, lad! Now for it!" shouted Branscombe, and they threw their joint weight against the door. It crashed open into the blazing room. There in the smoke they saw two figures, one groping in the red fog of smoke and flame, the other lying still! Jack, seizing the former, and exerting all the strength that had made him famous in the countryside, half-lifted, half-dragged it across the room back to the door.

"I'm done," his burden groaned, "who's risking his life to save mine?"

Whirling, dragging, halting, lifting him through the door and across that roaring, crackling, smoke-belching corridor into the other room, Jack half-gasped, half-shouted:

"Jack Branscombe!"

For he was not certain whether or not they would get back alive, and he meant that the man whom he knew to hate him, should, even at this last, know what he had done.

But, struggling manfully, he bore him into comparative safety, then looked around upon Ned Fletcher and, missing him, went back for him. At the door of the room he found him, more by touch than sight, on his knees and dragged him out of that raging fire to the gallery wherein his master was lying.

"I couldn't save the other," Ned groaned after a while, "for he was gone."

"Never mind, Ned, you've done your best. I think we can get this one safe away." And between them they lifted the charred, almost senseless, bundle of poor humanity, bore it away from that volcano, and so out of the great mansion so seriously threatened with demolition.

And just as Job Bingle's doubts were returning, he having missed the man so long suspected, that man scrambled down from a ground floor window along with Ned Fletcher, the pair bearing something inanimate between them.

Just then fire engines from different stations came dashing up, the brave brass-helmeted riders ceasing their warning shouts and leaping down to action in their battle with the fire king, that bravest of battles whereby peace wins victories as glorious as any claimed by war.

And, leaving this brave host of peace to fight and conquer, Rossiter and his companions busied themselves doing all they could for the man Jack Branscombe and Ned Fletcher had saved, bore him to a room in another wing unthreatened by the fire, and, having summoned

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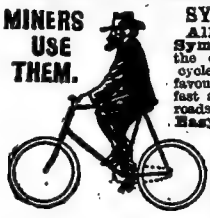

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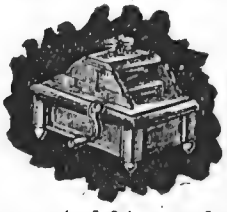

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medical assistance, they gathered round the couch whereon he lay.

"Who is it?" asked one of the frightened servants, and Fletcher answered in a broken voice:

"It's the Squire, the poor Squire!"

But Geoffrey Heseltine, looking down upon the pain-distorted face, said: "No, this isn't Cyril Roylance, whoever it may be."

Swiftly, deftly, they stripped his charred clothes from him. There on the shoulder, in one white space unscathed, unseamed, unshrivelled by fire, Rossiter beheld a long, deep, livid groove.

"No, no!" he said, "it's come back to me at last. I know him now. That's the mark of the bullet I almost downed him with in self defence five years ago. I've got two of the gang. I never dreamt to take their foreman. I thought him dead, that's why I never reasoned how it was his face and voice brought back old times. It's Tiger Dick! Whoever the man was they found in convict clothes dead in the River Dass, this is Richard Seldon."

The dying man's eyelids opened slowly and slightly as his own name fell upon his ears.

"Yes, you've got on the trail at last, Rossiter," he whispered painfully. "You used not to be so slow."

"Better late than never, Dick," said Rossiter gravely, and the other, with a faint flicker of the bravado which had been born in him and was living in him till this last, said, although with a gasp and a smile:

"But I've done you after all, I'm going to slip you; I shall be gone in a few minutes where you can't follow."

"I don't know that I'm particularly anxious to follow where you're going, Dick," Rossiter was saying, when Gerald Hastie raised his hand.

"Hush, hush, man. Those are not words to speed a fellow sinner to the Judgment Seat with. Richard Seldon, you have said what you know, that you are leaving this life; this, for you, unhappy life. Think, even in this last moment, can you do nothing to mitigate the evil you have done?"

"Not in your line, parson. I've been bad from the beginning."

"We're none of us good, and we've all got to go the journey you're going. Few, if any of us, are quite fit for that journey. Tell me, can we do anything to ease your pain of body?"

"No, the pain's gone now." Then, after a pause: "Thank you," and, after another pause, "Hastie you're a sportsman."

"Then can you do anything to ease your soul? Can you say anything that will lift suspicion from an innocent man? Think, man, it'll be something to have that to your account."

"Bah! my book's too heavy for me to hedge, especially now, the race is almost over. But, parson, who was it dragged me out?"

"It was me, master," sobbed Ned Fletcher, "me and Mr. Branscombe."

"Thank you, Ned. But Branscombe! S'truth! did you go in there after me?"

"I did."

"Well, you're a plucked 'un, I always knew you for that, though I hated you. Oh! I am going now. No! no! not yet. Parson, it's too late for me to do any good now, and yet, not too late to try! He dragged me out; he, the man I've tried to put away so. I'll do it with the last breath that's going from me. Listen, I downed Barker, I planted the locket Josh and Barney sneaked from Branscombe's chain. I planted it on the stairs; before that I killed Cyril Roylance in the train, changed togs with him, chucked him into the river when the train went over the bridge. I've been working this district with Josh and Barney, you've got them. I killed Morgan Chandler about an hour ago."

He fell back exhausted with the stress of speech.

"Oh! wicked, sinful man," said Gerald Hastie in tones such as none had ever heard him use before. "Think—think! you are on the threshold! While the life God has given you still burns in you, pray—pray! Utter one word! Think, one word! One supplication to the God you are about to meet for mercy."

"What's the use?"

"Because He died for sinners."

"For sinners, well, then He must have died for me. I'll take your tip, Gerald Hastie, you're a sportsman! Christ, mercy! Parson, stoop down, tell Mary I said that. She believes in him; she was named after His Mother!"

* * * * *

His head fell back just as the door opened and that Mary he had named glided into the room. Without a word, she sank on her knees, raining tears upon the charred and blistered hand. He said no other word, only for a moment the eyelids lifted again, something like a smile flitted over the pain-drawn face, and then those eyes were set in the gaze that sees no more—as we see things from here!

L'ENVOI.

So Tiger Dick cheated the gallows that Messrs. Brauner and Plumb went to after all. And people began to put two and two together and relate what misgivings they had always entertained concerning him. Lord and Lady Limberg declared that they had always been certain he was a bad lot, and his lordship consulted his solicitor as to the possibility of recovering the money he was certain he had swindled him out of at cards, but the solicitor in question dashed all hopes by pointing out to him that the fellow had left no estate whatever, inasmuch as that which he had held immediately prior to his death belonged, not to himself, but to the legatee and devisee under the real Cyril Roylance's will, that was to say, Miss Doris Dale, since become Mrs. Branscombe.

For Harcourt Dale had made amends for his past injustice in so far as lay in his power by giving a free consent to his daughter's marriage with Jack Branscome, who at last stood vindicated before all the world, and Gerald Hastie made the man he reckoned the best chap in the world and the girl he considered the best girl in the world, bar one, perfectly happy by joining their hands in holy matrimony.

As for the lady he considers absolutely the best in the world, will he ever make her happy? Perhaps, for he lives up to that good old motto, Nil Desperandum!

And now the shadow has gone from her life. In the corner of the little churchyard a grassy mound marks the place where a turbulent mutineer against God's law rests, wicked though he was, within His Acre.

But there is one man who thinks of him and mourns him as a friend. That one is Ned Fletcher. He is leading an honest life by honest labour on the Fallowfield estate, for Jack Branscombe bore no malice, and Ned thinks his new master the best and kindest alive, but you can never get him to think otherwise of his late one.

And sometimes over the little churchyard wall he casts a regretful glance on that grassy mound, where sometimes there lies a handful of wild flowers, placed there by a little girl whom, once, the man who sleeps there snatched from under the horses' threatening hoofs.

The End.

"I hear your husband is out of a job." "Why, he was never busier in his life." "What is he doing?" "Looking for work."

He: "Ethel, what can it mean? Last night I dreamed that I proposed to you." She: "I should say that you are more sensible asleep than awake."

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JOHN A. SMITH.

"Gloria Tonic" **cured** Mrs. H. Bester, of Welton, near Daventry, who has suffered for years. Mr. L. Pinkey, 3 Well Lane, Bridlington, a martyr to Rheumatism for 27 years, has been entirely cured through its use. Mr. J. Holden, of 28 Angles Road, Streatham, S.W., is an enthusiast over "Gloria Tonic." A neighbour of Mr. Holden, Mr. J. Crampton, 24 Angles Road, Streatham, S.W., says: "I can recommend 'Gloria Tonic' to all who suffer with Rheumatism, as I am thankful to say that your remedy has **cured me entirely**."

The following people have also been entirely **cured** through the use of "Gloria Tonic" attested to by testimonials which they have sent me: Mrs. J. Brewer, 59 St. Ann's Rd., Barking, E.; Mr. T. Marsh, 190 Bury New Rd., Whitefield, Lancs.; Mr. J. Metcalf, Hill Gill Farm, Mallerstang, Kirkby Stephen; Mrs. West, The Club, Surbiton; Mr. G. Chenneils, 11 Waterend, near Hemel Hempstead; Mrs. G. Hiron, 39 Stanley St., Queen's Rd., S.W.; Mr. E. Guest, Bissell St., Quinton, near Birmingham; Mrs. Sanderson, 22 West Park Rd., Newport, Mon.; Mr. L. Leyshon, 2 Gwindy Terrace, Pentrechwyth; Mrs. W. Smith, Applehouse, Tronston, Sandwick, Stromness; Mr. J. Helmsley, Hadlow Down, near Uckfield; Mr. P. Haslem, 32 Tanners Terrace, Ramsbottom; Mr. G. Mackay, Embo Dornoch, Sutherlandshire; Mr. J. Little, South Marston, Stretton St. Margaret's, Swindon.

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Short Stories That . . . . . Make You Laugh.

We devote every week space in *Short Stories* to pithy, humorous anecdotes similar to those which appear in these columns. To those readers who submit storyettes which are used, a six shilling novel will be awarded. The anecdotes may be either original or selected; in the latter case, the source MUST be stated. Attempts must reach the Storyette Editor, *Short Stories* Office, Henrietta Street, Strand, London, W.C., by Monday, December 23rd. Postcards only, please.

He Had Already Done So.

THE blushing bride-elect was rehearsing the ceremony about to take place. "I shall expect you to give me away, papa," she said. "I'm afraid I have done it already, Caroline," replied the old man nervously. "I told your Herbert this morning you had a disposition just like your mother's."

Not a Paradise.

WESTERNER: "Goin' ter settle, are yer?" Tenderfoot: "Yes, I have come here to stay, and have already bought a home. I was attracted to this place by an item in the newspaper which said there had not been a lawsuit in your country for ten years." Westerner: "Waal, there ain't. You see there ain't no use goin' ter law when Winchester rifles is as cheap as they air now."

What Followed?

IT was little Tommy Smith's fifth birthday, and, while out for a walk with his mother, he met his Uncle Jack. Expecting a tip, he greeted his uncle with—"Uncle Jack, I am five years old to-day." To which his uncle replied: "Are you really? Well, I wish you many happy returns of the day, Tommy." Tommy being silent, his mother said: "Say 'Thank you, Uncle Jack.'" But Tommy, in disgust at not getting his expected tip, replied: "What, have I really got to say 'Fank you' when he ain't give me nuffink at all?"

Got What He Asked For.

"SAM, can you lend me a sovereign that you have no use for?" said Jim Webster to Sam Seddon one day. "Certainly, Jim; I shall be pleased to accommodate you," said Sam, handing Jim a sovereign. Jim was so surprised at his luck in getting the cash that he bit the coin to see if he were awake or dreaming, and in doing so discovered that the coin was a counterfeit. "This is a bad one, Sam. I didn't think you'd cheat me like this." "I know it's a bad 'un, Jim. You asked me for one I had no use for, and I gave it to you. What more do you want?"

Where It Hurt.

"YOU have a daughter, have you not, sir?" said a minister to an old gentleman with whom he had formed a casual acquaintance as a fellow passenger. The old gentleman essayed to answer, but the question had strangely affected him. "I beg your pardon," said the minister, "if I have thoughtlessly awakened in your mind recollections of a painful nature. The world is full of sorrow, sir, and perhaps my question recalls to your memory a fair, beautiful girl, whose blossoming young life had withered in its bloom. Am I not right, sir?" "No, not exactly," replied the old gentleman sadly. "I have five unmarried darters, mister, an' the youngest of the lot is twenty-eight years old."

Mismated.

MRS. WILTON: "I have not heard from your daughter since she married a foreign count." Mrs. Bilton: "She is very unhappy." Mrs. W.: "Too bad; but such matches usually are unfortunate." Mrs. B.: "Indeed they are. You see the poor girl knows so little of foreign languages that she drops back into English every time she gets angry, and then her husband can't understand a word she says."

Vanquished.

FIRST VENDOR OF OINTMENT: "Gentlemen, I will now illustrate to you the wonderful powers of my ointment. I was present at an accident, and a dog had the misfortune to lose part of his tail. I immediately applied my ointment to the injured member, and a new piece of tail grew, and it resumed its ordinary appearance." Second Vendor: "Gentlemen, I also was present at that accident. I picked up the piece of tail that was cut off, applied my ointment to it, and immediately another dog grew out of the end of it." (Collapse of rival.)

Advice Not Wanted.

A YOUNG man was standing at a corner of a street, peaceably smoking a cigar, when an elderly person stopped and asked him: "How many cigars a day do you smoke?" "Three," patiently replied the other. "How much do you pay for them?" continued the inquisitor. "Threepence each," was the reply. "Don't you know, sir," continued the sage, "that if you would stop smoking and save up the money, by the time you are as old as I am you might own that big building at the corner." "Do you own it?" inquired the smoker. "Well, no, I don't," admitted the old man. "As it happens, I do," said the young man. And the sage walked on.

Her Eyes Annoyed Him.

FARMER HODGE (reading novelette): "I'm out of all patience with that Gladys Fitzallwyn in the story—the way she's abusing her beautiful eyes. She doesn't deserve to have none." Mrs. Hodge: What she been doing now?" Farmer Hodge: "This book is full of it. First she threw her eyes up to the ceiling, and then let them drop on the floor; then she darted them down on a long corridor, and rested them on the cool waters of the lagoon. Then she must have called them back somehow, for it says she bathed them in sad, salt tears, wiped them, and swept them with long lashes. Once she was fool enough to rivet them on the dome, and when I left off she was fixing them on a mantlepiece."

PHOTO COMPETITION.

THREE correct claims have been received this week, and £5 notes have been sent to the following:

MISS LLOYD (No. 48),
care of W. Branscombe, Esq.,
Cintra,
Walker Road,
Harrogate.

MR. DAN LENO (No. 49),
Springfield House,
Atkins Road,
Clapham Park, S.W.

MISS E. WALES (50),
39 Gilbey Road,
Tooting, S.W.

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The Brain Gymnasium.

In these competitions a prize of £1 1s. will be awarded each week to the competitor whose attempt we receive giving the correct solution of all the puzzles. If more than one is absolutely correct the prize of £1 1s. will be given to the first correct attempt dealt with.

If no lists of absolutely correct solutions are sent in, the first prize will be awarded to the competitor whose attempt is first dealt with showing the fewest mistakes.

Each week we shall award, in addition to the above, either ten of our gold-plated pencil-cases or ten popular novels, to be distributed amongst the competitors whose attempts are absolutely correct and have failed to win the first prize, or, if no complete lists of correct solutions are received, to those whose attempts show the fewest mistakes.

Write all your solutions on one side only of the paper, putting the number against each. Post the batch in an envelope marked "Brain Gymnasium," to reach the Editor, *Short Stories*, 18 Henrietta Street, London, W.C., by first post on Monday, December 30th, 1901.

Readers are invited to submit puzzles, acrostics, conundrums, word-squares, etc., for publication on this page. A gold-plated pencil-case will be given to each reader whose attempts are used. All attempts must be vouched for as original, and, of course, it is distinctly understood that the sender of a puzzle must neither compete in the competition nor divulge to anyone the solution. Any reader found infringing this rule will be severely dealt with.

No. 1.

ACROSTIC.

The initials of the words filling the blanks spell the name of a beautiful bird:

1. The —— river is found in South America.
2. The town of —— is situated on the Thames, near London.
3. Queen —— had more faith than the others who surrounded Columbus.
4. The —— was much too hot.
5. —— —— —— was the flower of English girls, and had a sad fate.
6. —— was the name of an early English Queen.

No. 2.

PROVERB.

My whole is a rhyming proverb containing 38 letters:

My 4, 12, 23, 19, 33 is the country where it originated.

My 18, 29, 27, 11, 24, 25, 7, 20, 9 is a holiday named in the proverb.

My 7, 4, 5, 6, 19, 22, 25, 15, 26 it is pleasant to find within doors on this holiday.

My 9, 21, 34, 28 it is pleasant to see without.

My 32, 37, 5, 25, 26, 31 is another holiday named in the proverb.

My 14, 35, 19, 30 often brightens the first holiday named, and on that day we expect to find plenty of my 1, 13, 30, 22, 17.

My 36, 2, 16, 3, 19 is a character who can 10, 4, 38 no favour on either day.

My 8 is found near the close of the first holiday and just as near the beginning of the second.

No. 3.

WORD SQUARE.

From the five words described below form a word-square:

My first, 'tis said, had power to charm,
But her enchantment led to harm;
A form of language is my second.
My third unsafe for boys is reckoned.
Stop always where my fourth you see,
And do my last if wrong you be.

No. 4.

WORD FORMING.

Form the name of the author of the last quotation from:

1. The second letter of the author of the first quotation.
2. The fourth letter of the author of the second quotation.
3. The first letter of the author of the third quotation.
4. The sixth letter of the author of the fourth quotation.
5. The sixth letter of the author of the fifth quotation.
6. The second letter of the author of the sixth quotation.

1. "The way was long, the wind was cold
The minstrel was infirm and old;
His withered cheek and tresses gray
Seemed to have known a better day."

2. "And Ardennes waves above them her green leaves,
Dewy with Nature's tear-drops, as they pass
Grieving, if aught inanimate grieves,
Over the unreturning brave—alas!
Ere evening to be trodden like the grass."

3. "In vain we seek a heaven below the sky;
The world has false but fluttering charms."

4. "Oh that I were a glove upon that hand,
That I might touch thy cheek!"

5. "No more surveying with an eye impartial
The long line of the coast,
Shall the figure of the old field-marshal
Be seen upon his post."

6. "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me."

7. "When the British warrior queen,
Bleeding from the Roman rods,
Sought, with an indignant mien,
Counsel of her country's gods."

No. 5.

CHARADE.

My FIRST sticks closer than a friend,
But is not half so much desired.
The poet hies him to my NEXT,
To be alone with frenzy fired.
My WHOLE most carry day by day;
Heavy or light, prove as it may,
They still would throw it quite away.

BROKEN WORDS.

No. 6.

1. Curtail a Moorish saint, and leave a bird with ornamental feathers.
2. Curtail a sweet drink, and leave a valuable wood.
3. Curtail a pitcher, and leave a sheep.
4. Curtail a conflagration, and leave an evergreen.

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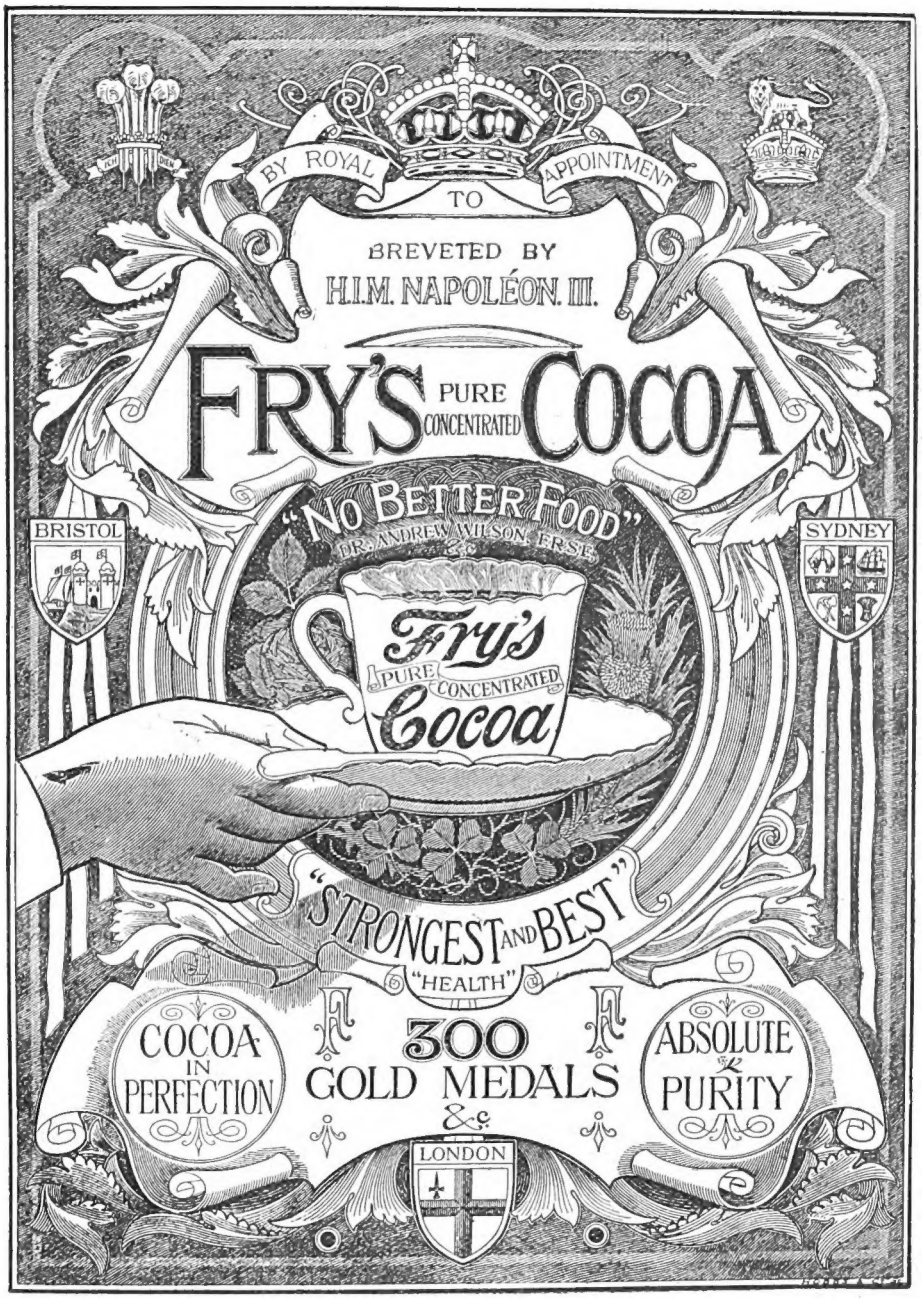

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